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*In a world
that was dying,
they fell in love—
forever*

Gallant Hearts

Elizabeth
Evelyn Wade

Oberheide

THE FIRST TIME

Suddenly they were in his suite with the door closed. It was very still.

Reginald said gently, "If you want to go . . ."

"No," Amanda whispered thickly, shocked at her reply.

"You're beautiful," Reginald said, his voice hoarse with passion. He swung her up into his arms, and she put her hands around his neck and laid her head on his chest, clinging to him as a child. He carried her to the bedroom and tenderly placed her on the large, ornately carved bed . . .

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**A Jove Book / published by arrangement with
the author**

PRINTING HISTORY
Jove edition / January 1984

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For information address: The Berkley Publishing Group,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.**

ISBN: 0-515-05573-5

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Prelude

THE MARCH WINDS ushered in torrents of icy rain that pounded furiously upon the winding, cobblestone streets of Sarajevo, the capitol of Bosnia. It was past midnight and most of the Bosnian citizens were in bed, dreaming of the warmth of spring.

Nineteen-year-old Gavrilo Princip was one of several men who chose that particular night for a rendezvous. The pale young man, with unnaturally flushed cheeks and deep set, burning eyes, hastened down the darkened streets, keeping to the shadows and skirting the well-lit areas. Every once in a while he paused in a doorway to glance furtively behind him, squinting in the rain to be absolutely sure no one was following.

By the time he reached his destination he was gasping for breath. The rain had soaked his clothes and seeped down the collar of his thin jacket. He shivered and knocked on the door of the clockmaker's shop three times in quick succession. There was no trace of a light, but eventually the door opened a crack.

"What do you want?" an old man's voice asked nervously.

"Freedom for all the Balkans," Gavrilo gasped, as a coughing fit overtook him.

The door opened wide enough to admit him and was quickly shut and securely bolted once he was inside.

"You shouldn't have come out on a night like this," the old man said in concern as Gavrilo continued to cough. Taking out a damp handkerchief, Gavrilo wiped his mouth with a

trembling hand. When he drew it away, it was stained dark red.

"I'm all right," he insisted, stuffing the soiled handkerchief into his pocket. "There are more important things to discuss this night than the state of my health," he reminded the clockmaker scornfully. "Are the others here yet?"

The old man sighed and led him to the back of his shop, where the other members of Young Bosnia were gathered around a table. The clockmaker was the oldest member of the secret society and deeply regretted having offered, in a moment of patriotic fervor, his establishment as a meeting place. Unlike Gavriló, he was afraid of death.

Except for the shopkeeper, the members of Young Bosnia were known only by their first names. The old man was simply referred to as the clockmaker.

As Gavriló joined them, they nodded in welcome but no one spoke. They waited for one more person to arrive.

"He should be here by now," Gavriló remarked finally.

"He will come," their leader, a man known as Oskar, assured them all. "He gave me his word."

"How do we know he's really a member of the Black Hand?" the clockmaker objected. "He could be a spy for the government."

Oskar frowned. "I told you before, he can be trusted."

The tense silence resumed unabated for another five minutes before the familiar series of knocks was heard at the front door. The clockmaker jumped and hurried to the door, returning with a tall man who had a dark beard and curly black hair. They carried a heavy wooden box, which they deposited in the middle of the room.

"I'm sorry I'm late, but it couldn't be avoided," the newcomer said in a harsh voice. He was a Serb. "I didn't want to be stopped and searched."

"Is everything here?" Oskar asked.

In answer, the Serb picked up a crowbar and pried open the box, revealing a large assortment of weapons including guns, ammunition, and hand grenades. "As you can see, gentlemen, everything we need to free ourselves from the Hapsburg yoke is here."

Oskar stood up, raising his glass in a toast. "Let us drink to the future, to June twenty-eighth, a day that will be long remembered in our children's history books." Once the toast

was finished, he added, "Everyone knows what he must do. If there is a change of plans, you will be contacted by me, according to our previous instructions. Good luck."

Choosing the weapons he needed, Oskar slipped them into his coat and silently left the shop. One by one the others followed suit. Gavriilo chose a gun and a packet of cyanide with which all the members were provided in case they were caught. By the time he left it had stopped raining.

The Serb was the last to leave and the clockmaker glanced uneasily down the street as he let him out. The Black Hand was a terrorist organization, its members at odds with the government. He hoped no one had seen the Serb enter his shop. Breathing a sigh of relief now that his part in the liberation movement was over, the clockmaker shut his door, unaware of the tall stranger standing in the shadows of the china shop across the street.

The stranger waited a few more minutes, then stepped out of the cover of darkness to stare in the direction of the departing Serb and the members of Young Bosnia, a look of interest on his handsome features. Underneath his overcoat he wore expensive evening attire. His shoes had been polished to a high sheen and little drops of rain glistened on them. He sported a well-groomed blond moustache and had thick, sandy brows and a wide forehead, with short hair that was a shade paler than his moustache. His fingers were long and slender, the nails well manicured and polished. On the middle finger of his right hand he wore an ivory and gold ring shaped like the head of Mercury, the mythological winged messenger of the gods.

The good-looking man frowned. Something unpleasant was in the wind.

"Well, my friend, what do you make of it?" a melodious voice with a slight accent inquired behind him.

Turning around slowly, Reginald Keyes faced a man of medium height and slim, wiry build. He had dark, wavy hair and mocking gray eyes. He was as elegantly dressed as Reginald. "What are you doing here, Vladimir?"

"Actually," Vladimir said with a grin, "I was following you."

Reginald raised his eyebrows. "Really? Why?"

"I was on my way to Countess Markoff's party, the same as you. In fact, I was right behind you when you suddenly took off after that fellow from the Black Hand. Unable to resist, I

decided to join in the fun. I hope your great American generosity will allow you to forgive me."

Reginald was wary. "Then your people had nothing to do with tonight's activity?"

"Would I have accosted you like this in such a friendly manner if we had?" Vladimir said, affronted. "Surely you give me more credit than that. But what about you? What do you have to do with the Black Hand and tonight's mysterious escapade?"

"Absolutely nothing," Reginald assured him. "I recognized the fellow and followed him here." Lighting a cigarette, he offered one to his companion, who accepted it gratefully. They smoked in silence for a few seconds, each one still suspicious of the other's motives and debating if he could be trusted. Finally Reginald spoke.

"The Black Hand has a nasty reputation."

"Indeed it has," Vladimir acknowledged. "What did you make of the box they dragged inside?"

"It looked heavy enough to contain weapons," Reginald said thoughtfully.

"Exactly what I was thinking," Vladimir exclaimed. "And June twenty-eighth isn't far away."

"June twenty-eighth?" Reginald mused.

"The day of the St. Vitas Festival, commemorating the battle of Kosovo, when the Serbs suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of their enemies, the Turks. The archduke has chosen that day to visit with his wife. What better time for a little display of fireworks!"

"It's not our concern, but I think we should at least notify our embassies," Reginald suggested after a slight pause.

The two men walked off together, relieved that for once they were on the same side, and unaware that the incident they had just witnessed would have devastating consequences that would alter the course of history. The world as they knew it would never be the same.

Chapter One

[1914]

PARIS HAD ALWAYS been Reginald's favorite city. During the day, it was an elegant, busy metropolis much like any other large city, but at night it underwent a magical transformation. The heady perfume of love drifted in on the evening breezes, creating an intoxicating aroma that stirred men's souls as it swirled down the avenues, boulevards, and shadowy back streets. After spending a few nights in the great city, people frequently found themselves doing totally uncharacteristic things. Bored married couples who visited Paris as tourists often rediscovered each other and found themselves, to their amazement, falling in love all over again. Stingy, cynical men became generous and expansive not only in money but in the giving of themselves. Men of puritanical beliefs who came to the city on business underwent radical changes in their personalities the longer they stayed. Slowly, gently, Paris wore down their rigidity and eroded their greed and avarice. The more they were able to relax and enjoy life, the more tolerant and broadminded they became of both themselves and others. Lovers exchanging kisses under the Arc de Triomphe or strolling arm in arm along the Champs Elysées evoked only sighs instead of looks of disapproval.

However, Paris had failed to weave its spell on Reginald's wife, Helen. The romance, the glamour, the excitement, and the beauty were all lost on her. It wasn't that she didn't see it, she simply refused to be swept up by any emotion stronger than her social ambition.

Reginald no longer possessed any illusions about his marriage. Helen had married him for his money. In exchange, she

had been a dutiful wife and produced two children. At no time had she pretended to enjoy the physical side of their marriage, but she had made a bargain and stuck to it stoically. The moment their son was born, they reached an unspoken agreement and slept in separate beds. It had been many years since he had sought out his connubial rights. Helen knew he was seeking satisfaction elsewhere, but she didn't put up a fuss so long as he was discreet about it. Occasionally Reginald toyed with the notion that she too was leading a secret life of sexual abandonment, but he could never quite believe it. In spite of her dazzling beauty and tremendous energy, Helen was a cold woman. Lust, passion, and desire had been diverted from their physical expression to the plane of worldly achievements; love was an unknown emotion for her. Without her husband's money, Helen would never have made it to the top of the social ladder; only as a means to an end did Reginald have a place in her world.

It was Reginald's last night in Paris before returning to New York for his daughter's eighteenth birthday celebration and coming out party. Ordinarily, he would be getting drunk on champagne with his friends, sporting a beautiful woman on each arm. Instead he was restless and wandered the streets aimlessly.

Lately, he had begun to feel depressed without knowing the cause. He knew his usual means of escape would not be enough to break the bonds of lethargy and melancholia that gripped him.

At the age of twenty-one, Reginald had inherited twenty million dollars from his father's ruthless exploitation of the Civil War. The money had come from the sale to both sides of thin blankets and defective weapons, but Reginald had, like other young men of similar backgrounds, accepted his inheritance and proceeded to enjoy what other men only dream of doing. Vast estates in America and Europe, yachts, priceless antiques, and a racing stable that could proudly boast the finest assortment of thoroughbreds in America were only some of the luxuries he purchased with the tainted money.

Helen, meanwhile schemed and connived until they were finally accepted by those who counted; the Astors, Vanderbilts, Morgans, and Whitneys.

While his wife eased their way into society, Reginald's life took an unexpected turn. A friend of his approached him on a

delicate matter. Since Reginald had contacts in high places around the world and spoke several languages fluently, was he willing to help his country by passing along useful information that might be of interest to the United States? Honored to serve his country in whatever capacity he could and thereby atone in part for his father's sins, he accepted the assignment. He discovered that intrigue and excitement added zest and sparkle to his life and he thoroughly enjoyed the new activity. His friends and family knew nothing about this side of his life, which only added to his sense of adventure. On his own, Reginald chose more and more dangerous missions that included stealing top secret papers from foreign embassies and smuggling plans out of the various countries he visited. He understood that if caught, his government would deny any knowledge of his activities. But the risk made it all the more exciting. Then, without warning, the thrill had gone out of it.

At the age of forty-two, after five years of playing at spying, Reginald's dreams of serving his country had lost some of its glitter. He was honest enough to realize that most of the information he passed on was unimportant and often ignored. Despite having a son to carry on his name, a mansion on Fifth Avenue, an estate in Newport, objects of art valued at over a million dollars, he was beginning to fear that his life was both meaningless and rootless.

It was disturbing to be engulfed suddenly by the disquieting feeling that his life was empty and without purpose. His rational mind insisted there was no cause to feel so unhappy. He still had many years of life left and all the money he needed. What was wrong with him?

A loud commotion at the end of the street interrupted his gloomy thoughts. Two rowdy men, obviously drunk, were trying to enter a well-known, high-class brothel. The burly man at the door refused to admit them, and after a vivid exchange of curses, they staggered off.

Reginald hesitated. He had frequented Madame Celeste's on numerous occasions in the past. Her girls were the *crème de la crème* of Parisian prostitutes. Sighing, he realized he did not want to be alone, and approached the establishment.

He was shown into a large room that was referred to by the guests as the "getting-to-know-you room." It was here that the men discussed with Madame what they required, and it was here they chose their young ladies of the evening. It was

also here they were entertained and had a drink or two before retiring to the privacy of the bedroom for more intimate business.

The room was comfortably and tastefully decorated. Expensive paintings by Matisse, Derain, and Rouault hung on the walls in heavy gilt frames. A piano stood at one side of the room. Vases filled with fresh flowers stood on the various side tables and on the mantel over the fireplace. A magnificent chrystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, giving off soft light. In the center of the room was a plush, dark blue carpet. Sofas, love seats, and settees upholstered with a silk material with a pattern of wild animals, fairies, and elves on it were situated around the room. It was only when you looked at these chairs closely that you noticed that when viewed as one piece they formed a scene depicting a young girl fleeing in terror from the clutches of a grinning satyr. Curtains of the same design hung from open windows. On the sofa with the satyr motif sat Madame Celeste and three of her girls.

At one time, Madame Celeste had been the mistress of a wealthy count. At his death he had left her the money she needed to open her establishment. In her day, she was reputed to be a great beauty, but time had had its way with her and now it was difficult to imagine her as a young woman. She had mounds of white hair piled on top of her head and very shrewd blue eyes. Her face was a mass of wrinkles and she seemed very frail. She could have been anywhere between sixty and ninety. No one knew for sure, and Madame would go to her grave with the answer. Tonight she was wearing a purple silk, high-necked gown. She wore a great number of diamonds on her fingers, around her neck, and on her ears. A breathtaking diamond tiara sparkled in her hair. At the theater or opera, or traveling in her chauffeured car, she looked every inch the aristocrat. Despite her diminutive size and her age, she inspired feelings of awe and affection even from her severest critics. She had lived long enough to become an institution. The day she died, many people would genuinely mourn her passing.

Madame handpicked her girls with care and an eye for more than just physical beauty. The chosen ones were put through several months of intensive training before they were allowed to mingle with the customers. She saw to it that her girls possessed good manners, had an ability to converse on a multi-

tude of subjects, and developed a taste for fine clothes. An aptitude for languages, painting, musical instruments, singing, or even embroidery were considered decided assets. Madame felt a young woman should be cultured and accomplished. Her girls were courtesans, not common streetwalkers. If a girl was caught stealing from a customer, tried to cheat the establishment, appeared drunk, or was heard to swear, she was instructed to leave, and no amount of tears or pleas could reinstate her in Madame's good graces. The restrictions placed on the girls in Madame Celeste's were compensated for by the working conditions, which were far superior to those anywhere else. Whenever a girl chose to leave, she could be assured of doing so with her pockets full of crisp franc notes. Madame Celeste took eighty percent of the take, but since the fees charged were very high, the girls' cut was more than sufficient.

Their food, lodging, and protection were taken care of by the establishment. They paid for their own wardrobes and any personal items they wished to purchase. On the whole it worked well. A doctor was available to be sure they remained in excellent health. They had one full day and two mornings off a week. Birthdays and holidays were celebrated with parties and an exchange of gifts. If one of the customers wished to give a particular girl a present, she was allowed to keep it. Should she become pregnant, arrangements were made by Madame for her to have her baby if she so chose and to return to work after the child was born. If she wished to have the infant adopted, Madame made the necessary arrangements. Almost without exception the women who left Madame Celeste's did so under happy circumstances and eventually did very well for themselves, coming to own little shops, becoming mistresses to wealthy men, or marrying rich men.

"It's good to see you again, Madame," Reginald said as he took her thin hand and raised it to his lips.

"Ah, Monsieur Keyes," Madame said graciously, honoring him with a smile. She still possessed an remarkable memory for faces, which she could place even after several years had passed. Reginald had last visited the place six months ago. The girls discreetly floated away and she motioned him to sit beside her. "Would you care for a drink?"

"A whiskey and soda," Reginald said without enthusiasm.

Madame did no more than glance in the direction of one of the girls, a petite redhead, but the girl immediately came over.

"Monsieur Keyes would like a whiskey and soda, Leone."

"Yes, Madame," Leone said respectfully.

"You look as though you have been working too hard," Madame chided him. "Americans always work too hard."

"My businesses run themselves," Reginald said with a smile. "But you're right. I am tired."

Leone returned carrying a silver tray with a large whiskey and soda and a glass of liquor for Madame, who always joined her customers in a drink. While Leone served the drinks, Madame studied Reginald with her shrewd blue eyes.

"To your health, Madame," Reginald said.

"And to yours. Something is troubling you," Madame suggested gently after the toast had been drunk.

Reginald shrugged. "Yes, but I haven't the faintest idea what it is," he admitted. "My daughter will be eighteen this week. Perhaps I'm feeling my age."

Madame chuckled, wheezing slightly. "Age is a very relative thing. To me, you are still a very young man."

"I pray that when I reach your dignified age," Reginald said gallantly, "I shall look so well and be in such excellent health."

"I have my little aches and pains," Madame said grudgingly, "but it is true what you say. *Le bon Dieu* blessed me with a strong constitution. I have never suffered from a serious illness. As for my looks, ah well, that is a thing of the past." She paused. "Is there someone in particular you wish to see tonight?"

"I leave it up to you," Reginald said, slowly sipping his whiskey and wondering if it had been a mistake to come. He felt no sexual desire.

Madame had a sixth sense about her customers. She could detect their moods, and knew which of her girls would best satisfy what mood. Monsieur Keyes was a very masculine man with strong passions, but tonight he seemed distant and not particularly sensual. Perhaps he was lonely and needed encouragement. An eager, impetuous, aggressive girl would not do. He needed someone who would take her time and maybe not have sex at all but just sit and talk or be affectionate. Someone who would not push him. The vision of a tall,

slender girl with dark brown hair rose before her. She summoned Leone again.

"Send Madeleine to me," she commanded.

Leone disappeared, returning a few minutes later with a handsome woman in her early twenties, dressed in a blue silk gown. She had wavy, dark brown hair and blue eyes that matched the color of her dress. Her ivory skin was smooth and flawless.

"You wished to see me, Madame?" she said in a gentle voice.

"My dear, Monsieur Keyes is in need of a little company. See if you can cheer him up."

"I shall do my best," Madeleine promised with a smile, escorting Reginald to one of the empty settees.

For over an hour they sat and sipped their drinks and discussed a recent art exhibit, the subject of a popular novel, the mysterious disappearance of a famous judge, and various other commonplace subjects. Madeleine then suggested a stroll in the garden, after which they returned to the main room to hear one of the girls playing the piano. There was a buffet of food on a long table in one of the other rooms, but Reginald wasn't hungry. As he sat next to Madeleine and smelled the aroma of her perfume and listened to her converse intelligently on a variety of subjects, a strange thing happened. For the first time in his life he found himself in the presence of a beautiful, cultured woman whose very appealing body and charms failed to arouse his carnal instincts. She might as well have been a piece of furniture for all the desire she aroused in him.

"The dancing has started in the black and white room," Madeleine said. "Would you care to go there?"

"No, I would rather go someplace more private," he said after a moment's hesitation. Maybe if he saw her naked, everything would be all right.

"We can go to my room," Madeline suggested with a smile. When he agreed, she escorted him to her quarters, located on the second floor and consisting of a sitting room, bedroom, and bath.

Madeleine's sitting room was decorated in a Chinese motif with a rich Oriental carpet covering the floor. There were many hanging plants and flowers in the room, giving it a

fresh, airy smell. The bedroom had white lace curtains at the windows and a white satin bedspread with gold threads woven into it. A dozen or so colorful pillows were arranged neatly on top of a bed with a brass headboard. Covering the floor from wall to wall was a deep rose-colored rug. The flowered wallpaper was of the very latest design. The faint aroma of Madeleine's perfume combined with the fresh scent of flowers to create an atmosphere that was deliberately provocative.

"You have very attractive rooms," Reginald said sincerely.

"Thank you," Madeline replied, pleased. There was a knock on the door. "That is probably one of the servants bringing us some champagne and a little something to eat. Would you answer it for me, please, while I change into something more comfortable?"

Reginald answered the door and tipped the servant. When he returned to the bedroom, Madeleine had emerged. She had let her hair down and was wearing a rose-colored silk dressing gown that outlined her figure. He knew she had nothing on underneath.

"You look very beautiful," Reginald said, going over to her and kissing her firmly on the mouth. She responded with ardor, but after a few minutes he pulled away, trying not to panic. He still felt nothing.

Realizing he needed more time, Madeleine said she was famished and guided him to the food and drink. They continued to talk, but there was a slight constraint between them as each was putting off the inevitable, unsure of the outcome. Finally there was nothing more to say. Madeleine got up and came over to him. She put her arms around him and began to kiss him, opening his shirt.

"You look very desirable," Reginald said as she paused to see what sort of reaction she received. "I would like to make love to you, but I'm not sure . . ."

Madeleine placed a finger on his lips. "Whatever happens happens," she assured him. Leading him into the bedroom, she began to undress him very slowly, kissing him, touching him, rubbing up against him with her body, the silk gown brushing his naked flesh. Kneeling, she took his penis in her mouth. At the same time, she began to gently massage his scrotum and the inside of his thighs. He groaned and she led him to the bed, pleased she had succeeded in arousing him. It was only by closing his eyes and concentrating on the rhythmic

movements and feelings he was experiencing that Reginald managed to stay erect. As he came it was with a sigh of relief, not ecstasy. Madeleine cried out in pleasure at the same time. Afterward, she fell asleep in his arms, apparently content.

While she slept, Reginald lay awake in the dark knowing full well it wasn't the alcohol that had nearly incapacitated him. But what could have caused such a thing to happen? This had been the first time in a long life of sexual experience that he had come close to being impotent, and it frightened him. As he drifted off into a troubled sleep his thoughts turned to Madeleine. The young woman who had so skillfully done her best to arouse him and had cried out in pleasure at his lovemaking was paid to do so. He was, after all, just another customer. Whether or not she liked him or was attracted to him was not part of the arrangement. If she despised him or found him boring or even repugnant, she was trained to hide such feelings. He stared at Madeleine, her hair spread across the pillow, breathing deeply and evenly, and felt an inner hunger that he had never known before. There had been many women in his life since he had first come of age but none of them, including his wife, Helen, had ever loved him. Never before had love seemed particularly important. Sex was a recognizable need and something he paid for with women like Madeleine and, in a more socially acceptable way, with Helen. At forty-two years of age, he realized he desperately craved the loving embrace of a woman who cared about him and who wanted to be with him above all other men, not for money or power or social prestige, but because she loved him.

Carefully, so as not to wake her, Reginald removed himself from Madeleine's embrace and got dressed in the outer room. Before leaving, he placed an extra few hundred franc notes on the table. Taking leave of Madame Celeste's, he walked down the empty streets both exhilarated and frightened at the idea of discovering love for the first time. Curiosity burned inside of him. How and where would it all begin? Was it even possible?

Chapter Two

THE UNATTRACTIVE GRAY stone building at number 48 Hackett Lane belonged to Mrs. Eugenia Powell, Amanda's mother-in-law. It had been left to her by her late husband, Clifford, along with fifty thousand pounds and bitter memories of a mistress in Tottingham Court. Sadly, the house was devoid of any beauty, style, or elegance. Amanda Powell, possessed of a lively sense of humor, had often wondered whether houses, like animals, reflected the personality of their owners. The monstrosity Clifford had built appeared to her at times to be positively puffed up with a sense of its own self-importance and blissfully ignorant of any flaws in its character. Nor was the house any more attractive on the inside. Amanda's mother-in-law was a woman whose taste ran to unoriginal landscape pictures in ornate gilt frames and overstuffed furniture in drab floral prints. The house was perpetually kept at an uncomfortably warm temperature year round, and the sitting room was crammed with dainty Dresden figurines, Oriental lacquer boxes, and a huge assortment of sly, smiling china cats.

Amanda frowned as she deftly repaired a tear in a spangled gown belonging to one of her customers. Ever since her marriage she had been taking in sewing in order to earn extra money for personal expenses. She and her husband, Michael, had lived here for the past two years of their marriage, and if they had not, she reminded herself, they would have starved. The shrewd Powell business acumen and work ethic had not been passed on to Michael. Though trained as an architect, he

was not able to hold a position with any firm for more than a few months.

"I don't know why you insist upon demeaning yourself by sewing other people's clothes as if you were a common seamstress. It's not at all necessary," Eugenia stated sharply as she sat down on a maroon flowered settee, taking out a frame of embroidery from the beaded bag she had brought with her. "If you must do something," she added, pushing the needle through the material with unnecessary violence, "you should take up embroidery or crewel. Those are the occupations of a lady."

"There's nothing shameful about honest work" Amanda said, keeping her eyes fastened to the glittering gown in her lap, trying not to become embroiled in another argument. Michael hated it when they fought, and since she knew he too disliked the idea of her working, he would probably take Eugenia's side.

"If you were to use your sewing skills to benefit those poor unfortunates Reverend Tisdale talks about on Sundays, that would be quite another matter," Eugenia continued, "but sewing for someone else in order to make a profit is really quite . . ."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Amanda cut in ruthlessly as she snipped the threads and put the shears away in her straw basket.

Eugenia's lips compressed into a thin line of disapproval. "There's no reason for you to disgrace us in this manner when you and Michael will always have a comfortable home here with me."

Exerting tremendous self-control, Amanda refrained from retorting that it galled her to have to ask her mother-in-law for money to purchase a much needed new pair of shoes. "We appreciate everything you have ever done for us," she said in her cool, soft voice, folding her long, graceful hands together in her lap, "but we don't want to take your generosity for granted. There are some things I ought to pay for myself," she said.

"Humility is a quality you should learn to cultivate," Eugenia said, making Amanda flush up to the roots of her honey-colored hair. The knuckles on her hands turned white with rage. "I'm sure if I can find it in my nature to be generous to my son and his wife, the least you can do to please me

is refrain from groveling about looking for work as a seamstress so that I find it difficult to hold my head up in public. My friends are beginning to suspect I treat you and Michael pretty shabbily. Why else would you take in sewing? Have I ever begrudged you anything?" she challenged, glaring accusingly at Amanda with her protuberant blue eyes.

"No," Amanda replied coldly. "You've never refused us anything." But silently she thought, you've crippled Michael with your generosity and made us beholden to you for every shilling.

Eugenia had every intention of pursuing the subject further when the two women heard a familiar voice at the front door. In a few moments Michael had joined them. He carried two packages wrapped in tissue paper and tied up with colorful ribbons.

"A present for an extremely generous mother and one for my beautiful wife," Michael said gaily as he deposited a kiss on each woman's cheek.

Eugenia's normally harsh features lit up with a smile of genuine pleasure. "How thoughtful," she exclaimed as she unwrapped her gift to reveal yet another china cat, this one licking his paws.

Amanda's face did not reflect the joy of her mother-in-law. Michael's early arrival home, his attempt at creating an impression of high good spirits, combined with the offering of gifts, were ominous signs. Unwrapping her package, she saw that her present was a pair of expensive filigree garnet earrings that matched the necklace he had given her last Christmas. "They're lovely," she said mechanically and looked up to find Michael watching her anxiously. She smiled stiffly. "I'll be sure to wear them with the necklace on Sunday," she promised, trying to appear happy. But her voice sounded dull and flat even to her own ears. She had seen the confirmation of her worst fears in Michael's eyes. He had lost his position at Quibley's, a small architectural firm in the Strand.

Michael flushed and turned away. Walking over to the fireplace, he gazed moodily into the small fire.

"I should think you would be able to express a little more enthusiasm for such a beautiful gift," Eugenia said, frowning. "Not every husband brings home unexpected presents for his wife." As she said this, she got up and went over to stand beside her son.

Michael was the very antithesis of his mother. Tall and well built, he stood with casual elegance against the marble fireplace, ignoring his mother's whispered remarks about Amanda's ungrateful, selfish nature. His golden hair was disheveled. His brows were fair, the lashes long, emphasizing the deep blue of his eyes. His complexion was smooth and flawless. The only feature that wasn't in perfect symmetry was a chin that had a slight tendency to recede, but since it had a cleft in it, this gave him a very engaging appearance and diminished the fleeting impression of weakness. Beside his mother, whom he dwarfed, he looked like a veritable god. Eugenia was small, with a sallow, mottled complexion and stiff, iron gray hair. Her angular features resembled a gray stone indiscriminately chiseled. Her thin, bloodless lips and bulging, light blue eyes were not like her son's, but she took immense pride in his good looks and popularity.

Michael's handsome appearance and easy charm had caused the practical, sensible Amanda to fall violently in love with him, but now she studied him dispassionately, wondering what had happened this time to make him quit or be fired from Quibley's.

"I'd like to be alone with Amanda," Michael said, turning around abruptly. His mother, who had her arm on his, was thrown off balance and had to grab at the fireplace mantel in order to keep from falling.

"Very well," Eugenia said with as much dignity as she could muster. Shooting a venomous glance at Amanda, she added, "I'll be nearby if you need me."

Amanda watched Michael move about the small room straightening pictures, picking up the china cats and putting them back, and she braced herself for the scene that would follow. For several minutes there was only silence. He wants me to be the one to initiate the discussion, I know, but I won't. It's up to him to tell me what happened.

Michael stopped moving about and sat down on a chair next to her. "I don't know how you do it," he said finally, "but you always seem to know. You must be a witch," he said with a crooked smile.

"What happened?" Amanda sighed.

"It's that idiot Fredericks. He raked me over the coals because the presentation wasn't ready when he thought it

should be. But you can't rush things like that. I refuse to do a slapdash sort of job."

"I'm sure Mr. Fredericks has schedules to meet," Amanda said reasonably, "and if it was a rush job, he would have understood if your work wasn't as perfect as it usually is."

"I can't turn in a job that's only half-baked. I'm just not made that way." Michael flushed.

"And naturally you told him so," she said dryly.

"I wasn't going to stand there and let him insult me in such a loud voice that the people in the outer office heard every word. He actually had the nerve to call *me* incompetent when it was my plans that brought them the account." Michael stood up again and began pacing about the room, his hands in his pockets.

"Perhaps," Amanda suggested, hoping to sound tactful while bringing home a point, "you didn't take into consideration the fact that the account people were putting pressure on Mr. Fredericks to speed up the work. I'm sure if Mr. Fredericks lost his temper with you it was because he was afraid of losing the account to some other architectural firm if he didn't deliver the plans on the date he promised. You've said yourself he has great respect for your work."

"The people from Mudgely were in raptures over my drawings," Michael said sulkily. "They were put off twice before and hardly made a murmur. They could have been put off a little longer if Fredericks had been willing to soothe their ruffled feelings."

Amanda wanted to scream. Pride in one's work was an admirable trait, but when it was carried too far, it turned into arrogance. Michael couldn't care less what Mr. Fredericks was up against or what the firm of Mudgely and Potter wanted. He had the short-sighted, self-centered view of the creative artist who was never taught discipline. His talents had brought him numerous opportunities, but he had difficulty in taking direction that went contrary to his own. His tendency to miss deadlines lost him opportunities almost as fast as he received them. This was the fifth job in six months and the one he had stayed in the longest—ninety days.

For the first time Amanda had allowed herself to feel hopeful about the future. Maybe this time, she had thought, he would hold on to the job long enough for them to move into a

home of their own. The disappointment was particularly keen, but she tried to keep this out of her voice.

"Mr. Fredericks likes you, Michael, and he thinks your work is original, even brilliant. He might be persuaded to take you back."

"I have no intention of going back unless he formally apologizes," Michael said, annoyed at her lack of support, "which I must say, I think highly unlikely."

"I see!"

"I suppose you think I should have taken his abuse and produced something for Mudgely and Potter no matter what," Michael said resentfully.

Amanda did think so, but she tactfully refrained from saying so. Instead, she occupied herself by carefully folding the dress she had mended.

"I wish you wouldn't get involved in that again," Michael said, frowning. "You know how much Mother and I dislike it. I'll get another position. In the meantime, we won't be forced into the street."

Laying the dress aside, Amanda looked at her husband with a mixture of amusement and annoyance. "You particularly abhor groveling to others, and yet you expect me to do so every day of the week with your mother when she is a far worse tyrant than Mr. Fredericks could ever be."

Michael looked genuinely shocked. "She's never refused us anything."

"Whenever it's something that concerns you, she is most receptive," Amanda conceded, "nor has she ever outrightly refused me anything. But she has certainly done everything she could to make me feel like a poor relation."

"If you feel she's treated you badly," Michael said slowly, "I could speak to her."

"Really, Michael," Amanda said, irritated, "sometimes you're very dense. It would do no good whatever to speak to your mother. She would only deny whatever I said. In any case, we are in no position to protest. We can only be grateful for whatever crumbs she may bestow on us." Almost instantly she regretted this outburst, since it had the effect of altering Michael's mood from one of anger and defensiveness to self-pity.

"It's all my fault," Michael said gloomily. "If I had only taken over my father's business when he died, like you sug-

gested, we wouldn't be dependent on my mother."

Recognizing this as her cue to jump in with solicitous words of comfort, Amanda found herself reluctant to say them. "It's no good looking back," was all she could manage, and this in an unusually cool voice.

The successful business Clifford Powell had so assiduously built up in his lifetime had been completely destroyed a year after his death by the neglect and disinterest of his son and the greed and avariciousness of his partner, who robbed the coffers and left the business in debt before disappearing from sight. Rumor had it he later turned up in South Africa. The firm could have been salvaged by loans, hard work, and a tight budget. His father's business friends were willing to help, but Michael's interests did not lie in factories, and he would not take the time or trouble to learn the textile trade. To make matters worse, instead of investing what money came in to build up the business, he went on a wild spending spree that Amanda later came to recognize as having its roots in fear. He purchased expensive presents for his family and friends, traveled to Europe first class, and lived exactly as if he were still a wealthy man. The day arrived when the creditors could no longer be put off, and the world as Michael knew it came crashing down about his handsome head. Eugenia, who had her own money, had offered to pay off their debts and invited them to come and live with her temporarily, until Michael could establish himself in a suitable occupation. That had been over two years ago, and Amanda was becoming disillusioned. Michael's talk of independence was beginning to sound like a pipe dream. Any money he made during the brief time he held down jobs went toward purchasing more extravagant gifts and expensive clothes and to his mother for their upkeep. There was never enough left at any one time to establish themselves in a home of their own.

"I'm a failure," Michael muttered. "I ought to face it. I thought I should be able to stick it out at Quibley's, but I couldn't. I never can. It's hopeless."

"Nonsense! There's no reason why you shouldn't be extremely successful. You went to all the right schools. You have charm and enormous talent."

"You don't understand," Michael said, oblivious of her attempt to coax him out of his unhappy frame of mind. "I've always wanted to accomplish something out of the ordinary,

but I never seem to have the chance. Do you have any idea how frustrating it is to be forced to work with unimaginative, grubby little people with preconceived ideas of what they think will go over and time schedules that are quite impossible to meet? Or terrified, narrow minds who want only exact replicas of the latest success and who wouldn't recognize an original idea if they fell over it?"

"Put like that," Amanda said, "it does seem pretty ghastly, but surely not every client is like that."

"They're tradesmen, all of them with no esthetic sense, no more idea of style or taste than . . ." Michael halted as his eyes met Amanda's, and they both smiled, thinking of his mother.

"I've been a beast," Michael admitted sheepishly. "I don't know how you've been able to put up with me this long." He stood up and pulled her up too. "I know after all this time my word doesn't mean much, but I swear I shall do everything I can to keep the next position I secure and submerge my natural instincts to rant and rave so we can get out of here. I love you, Mandy, you know I do." With these words, Michael kissed her.

Amanda responded only halfheartedly to this affecting speech. She had heard it all before. Promises were easily given, she reminded herself, when one was feeling remorseful and looking for sympathy. Nevertheless, she found some of her anger and resentment fading.

Undoing the two top buttons on her blue dress, Michael whispered huskily in her ear, "Let's go up to our room until supper is ready."

This action produced quite the opposite effect than was intended. Indignation, even rage, welled up inside Amanda. This was the way their quarrels always ended, she thought furiously. They retired to their bedroom, where she comforted him by allowing him to make love to her. It was all a pretense. He was pretending he would change when he knew he wouldn't, and she was pretending to believe him and to want him to make love to her when in fact she didn't. She hadn't wanted him to make love to her for some time, but she had never had the courage to refuse him. Feeling as if she would go mad if she stayed another minute in the house, Amanda broke free from Michael's embrace.

"I have to return this dress to Mrs. Lake," she said. "I promised to get it to her by five thirty and it's nearly that now.

I won't be long." Snatching up the gown, she walked out without glancing back. She had hurt Michael and knew if she looked back even once and saw that hurt in his eyes she wouldn't be able to leave.

As she struggled into her coat in the hallway, Eugenia made an appearance. "Where are you going?" she demanded.

Without bothering to answer, Amanda stepped outside into the cool, crisp air and firmly shut the door in her mother-in-law's face.

She had been walking for ten minutes when she realized that in her haste to escape she had left the dress on the mahogany stand in the foyer, but she had no intention of returning for it now.

As she turned a corner, she realized her steps had taken her in the direction of the Café-Royal, a favorite haunt of the infamous, now deceased, Oscar Wilde. The immensely popular restaurant was one she and Michael had frequently dined in during the early, prosperous months of their marriage.

Pausing outside a confectioner's shop next door, she gazed in wistfully at the exquisitely wrapped display of chocolates, licorice, mints, lemon balls, orange slices, and taffy and let her thoughts drift back to happier times.

Of medium height and slim build with a pale complexion, Amanda had never considered herself anything more than passable. She felt her nose, lips, and chin were all in the right places and all quite ordinary. It was true she had always been rather proud of her thick honey-colored hair and deep set brown eyes with reddish flecks, fringed by long, dark lashes, but she did not consider herself a beauty. A realist, Amanda knew there were many women far more attractive than she. Her father had been a country doctor who had left her with only enough income to keep her head above water. Since she wasn't rich or uncommonly beautiful, Amanda had been considerably taken aback when Michael Powell had singled her out at Sally Fortesque's dinner party. At first she thought he was merely flirting with her, but she soon discovered he had very serious intentions. He was handsome, talented, charming, romantic, and rich, and she quite lost her head. Telling herself she would be sensible about it did no good whatever. The fact that his parents objected on the grounds that they wanted him to marry a wealthy debutante, or at the very least the daughter of an impoverished peer, only made his attentions

seem that much more flattering.

There had been times, Amanda thought with dry humor, when she had actually pictured herself as Cinderella being swept off her feet by Prince Charming. Even in the midst of the fairy tale she had misgivings, but she had allowed Michael's kisses to smother her anxieties. After only four months of courtship, she had thrown all caution to the wind and eloped with him to Europe, where they wined and dined with French marquises, Russian counts, and the nouveaux riches industrialists from America. Michael showered her with presents and laughed at her protests that they try to economize. When they returned home, he insisted they rent a huge house that was more like a mansion and filled it with servants in starched blue and white uniforms. The house awed Amanda, who felt daunted by the prospect of redecorating it, while the control of so many servants unnerved her.

Clifford's death six months later ushered in reality with a chill wind. Michael had long ceased to be Prince Charming and she Cinderella. Eugenia, Amanda thought with a smile of grim amusement, was still a fine wicked stepmother.

"I don't believe it," an excited, high-pitched voice that was vaguely familiar squealed at Amanda's elbow. "If it isn't Mandy."

"Sally," Amanda said in some surprise. "I was just thinking about you."

"How marvelous," Sally said, her bright brown eyes, so like a sparrow's, sparkling with delight. "It must be fate, because only last evening Mother asked me whatever had become of you."

"I'm afraid Michael and I don't get about much anymore," Amanda said after a slight pause of embarrassment. She noted with admiration that as usual, Sally was dressed in the latest fashion. She was wearing a rust-colored suit with a fox fur collar. The skirt was so narrow about the ankles that she could barely hobble, and the cream-colored silk blouse had a V neckline. The V was a very daring style that had horrified Eugenia when it first appeared early that year. She had expressed her opinion that it must be dangerous to both the health and moral character of decent English women. Amanda knew Sally thought it diverting to be considered fast. She was always at the forefront of fashion and had the satisfaction of seeing her detractors eat their own words when the

shocking new designs she helped usher in became the latest rage.

"I was out shopping, but I didn't buy a thing," Sally moaned, making a face. "Shopping simply exhausts me and makes me ravenous. Now that you're here my spirits are much improved, but I'm still starving. Let's have a bite to eat at the Café-Royal. You can tell me what you and Michael have been up to and what it's like living with that dragon of a mother of his. It will be just like old times."

"Michael will be wondering whatever became of me," Amanda said desperately, knowing she probably couldn't afford a pot of coffee and dessert at the Café-Royal let alone a full-scale meal. In addition, she had a horror of being alone with Sally, who had a knack of drawing out intimate confidences from even the most reticent of individuals.

Sally eyed her friend, her bobbed auburn hair cocked to one side. She wore a dainty cream hat with a vertical rust-colored feather, which added to the effect of an inquisitive sparrow. Tucking her arm firmly in Amanda's, she pushed her toward the restaurant. "Michael must spend a few nights alone at his club. It will do him a world of good to know you aren't forever at his beck and call. I insist on immediate capitulation, and whatever we devour is on me. The last time we met, you paid the bill, remember? I'd left my purse at home and was so mortified when the waiter arrived with the check."

Although Amanda could not recall any such incident and had doubts as to its authenticity, she nevertheless allowed Sally to coax her into the restaurant, vowing she would have only coffee.

The mirrored walls, spotless white linen, and plush red velvet hadn't changed at all since she and Michael had last dined there over two years ago. The service and the quality of the food was as excellent as ever, she noted with satisfaction once Sally overrode her scruples and ordered two fillets de sole sur le plat.

"Do you like my hat?" Sally asked as soon as the waiter took their order.

"It's very dashing," Amanda agreed.

"Actually," Sally confided, taking it off and laying it on an empty chair, "it isn't even out yet officially, but by next year small hats will be all the rage."

No longer able to contain herself, Amanda burst out, "How

did you ever find the nerve to cut your hair?" She was filled anew with admiration and amazement at the lengths Sally went to in order to keep up her image.

"Isn't it striking?" Sally said, giggling.

"It certainly is," Amanda agreed, unable to make up her mind if she liked it or not.

"Lots of people will be wearing it before long," Sally assured her confidently. "Irene Castle's having it done and you know how popular she is. Actually," Sally added in a low voice, her eyes brimming over with mischievous delight, "bobbed hair isn't the most radical change you'll be seeing on the scene in nineteen fifteen. Raul informed me only last week that next year, ladies' skirts will be raised to the midcalf and we'll all be wearing high laced boots. Even I don't have the nerve to be the one to plunge in and break the ice there."

"How does Cecil feel about having such a madcap wife?" Amanda asked with a smile.

"Oh, he's used to me by now. As unlikely as it seems, Cecil is rather proud of me, except when I cut and bobbed my hair. He stared in positive horror when he saw it for the first time. His face turned a dreadful purplish hue and his eyes looked like boiled gooseberries. He got up and without a word walked out of the library. He wouldn't speak to me for days."

"Is he still upset?" Amanda inquired hesitantly.

"Don't be silly," Sally said, laughing. "Cecil's anger never lasts long. He always comes around. Cecil is a dear."

The marriage of Sally Dalingdridge to Cecil Fortesque, when she was only nineteen and he forty-five, had stunned everyone acquainted with them and caused many ominous predictions about the length of their wedded bliss. In addition to the twenty-six-year difference in their ages, they were as unlike as any two people could possibly be. To everyone's surprise, the marriage had endured despite the forebodings of family and friends.

Sally had a nervous, high-strung temperament. She was wildly extravagant, socially active, with an allergic reaction to country life, a passion for traveling to out-of-the-way places, and a positive driving ambition to be thought an initiator in the world of high fashion.

Cecil was conservative, old-fashioned, a lover of country life, dogs, horses, and peace and quiet. He loved his home too much to want to leave it for more than a fortnight, but he was

extremely generous and tolerant of his wife's needs. They lived separately, she in fashionable London, he on his Yorkshire estate, except for twice a year, when he visited her in the city and she roughed it in the country. The visits never lasted more than a couple of weeks at most. They tended to get on each other's nerves. On the surface they seemed happy enough, affectionate, and quick to jump to the other's defense.

Like Sally's other friends and acquaintances, Amanda, who had known her since they attended the same finishing school, had wondered at her choice. Sally was young and very attractive, with a number of admirers. Cecil was rich, but so was Sally, and he wasn't particularly handsome, charming, or intelligent. Her parents had been amazed at her declaration and insisted she wait at least a year, hoping that if she had time to think about it and was exposed to other, younger suitors, she would change her mind. Exhibiting unusual steadfastness, Sally stayed firm and married Cecil three weeks after her nineteenth birthday. Cecil would now be in his fifties, Amanda thought. She wondered if Sally had ever regretted her decision.

"You were the deep one at Miss Avery's," Sally said as she sipped a glass of excellent sherry, "but in spite of your quiet, self-contained ways, you always did have the most transparent face."

Confused, Amanda blushed but comforted herself with the thought that Sally couldn't possibly know what she was thinking.

"You were wondering about Cecil and me," Sally said, her eyes brimming over with laughter at Amanda's reaction, "and whether or not I wished I had married someone else. Don't feel badly about it. Everyone always does wonder. It's quite natural, considering how opposite we are."

"Are you happy?" Amanda ventured tentatively, thinking that she would never have asked that question of anyone else, nor would she have expected an honest reply.

"Cecil is very good-natured. That's one of the reasons I married him. I'm not the easiest person in the world to get along with. Another reason I married him was security." She laughed. "I know what you're thinking, that I'm not at all the type to want security, but that isn't true. I need an anchor, a person I trust who I know will always be there. That's Cecil."

"You must love each other very much," Amanda said

awkwardly as their meal arrived, only too well aware that love had never been mentioned. Silence reigned over the table while the waiter set the steaming dishes down and refilled their water glasses. Once he had left, and each had tasted her food and remarked on the delicious flavor, Sally returned to the conversation, much to Amanda's discomfort.

"Love," Sally said slowly as she took a bite of her fish, "is an emotion I find rather difficult to define. On the one hand, I love Cecil very much indeed. I would certainly never think of leaving him. If, however, you are referring to love in a more passionate sense, then I would have to say that I don't."

Amanda chewed her fish and wished she knew how to reply to this very forthright speech.

"At the time, of course, I convinced myself I loved Cecil in all the ways a woman is expected to love her husband," Sally continued, oblivious to Amanda's confusion. "It was only later I discovered I had been mistaken. But in every other respect Cecil and I are quite content. Now that we have finished talking about me for the moment, let's hear about you and Michael. You asked me a direct question and now I'll take advantage of it and ask you the same thing. Are you happy, Mandy, because just between the two of us, I shouldn't think that you were."

"We have our problems like most couples," Amanda conceded stiffly, irritated at Sally's perception and even more annoyed at herself for letting it show.

"A great many dire forecasts were made when I married Cecil," Sally acknowledged cheerfully, "but the same could be said of you and Michael."

"I'm well aware of the difference in our position," Amanda began defensively.

"Anyone who thought you had married Michael for his money," Sally said with a sniff, "must have been weak in the head. You were bowled over by him, my dear, and who could blame you? Michael is every young girl's dream of a romantic hero. Personally, I thought you had made a terrible mistake, but I'm sure if I had spoken out at the time you would have relegated me to the devil. You need to respect the man you're married to and Michael, for all his good looks and talents, is weak. It isn't entirely his fault," Sally conceded, seeing Amanda's flushed countenance. "His mother, I'm sure, pre-

fers him that way. I must say, I felt very sorry for you when I learned you had moved in with Eugenia Powell. It must be ghastly to be forced to share the same roof with her," she said with a melodramatic shudder.

"It's not that bad, and the situation is only a temporary one," Amanda said, frowning, pushing her food around on the plate with her fork, having suddenly lost her appetite. "Once he has settled himself in and set enough aside, we shall make a new start on our own." The words came mechanically, even though she knew Sally didn't believe them any more than she did. They were empty, meaningless words, she thought. Did she still love Michael or were her feelings for him only familiarity laced with pity and guilt, now that his fortune was gone? What had happened to the love and tenderness that had stirred her into eloping with him? She knew the embers that were left of their shaky relationship might not stand the pressure much longer. They needed to be alone again, just the two of them. He was weak, a dreamer, but if she could conceive and bear Michael a child, maybe that would tip the scales. The shock of being a father might shake him enough so that he would give up his paper dreams and become a responsible adult instead of a very talented, creative, spoiled child.

"Poor Cecil," Sally said as she finished her last bite of fish and laid the silverware aside with a sigh. "His mistress died last week and he's taking it very badly."

"His mistress!" Amanda repeated in shock, momentarily diverted from her own troubles.

"Yes," Sally said, pleased at her rapt attention. "Mrs. Drufus was his companion for years and years, even before Cecil and I married. He kept her with him afterward, especially once he realized separate establishments would have to be maintained if we weren't going to end up in the divorce courts; not that Cecil would ever consent to a divorce under any condition."

"But how do you know? Cecil didn't . . ."

"Good heavens, no." Sally laughed. "He has no idea I ever knew about her existence. That's what makes it so awkward trying to comfort him—I'm not supposed to know a thing about it. He would think it the greatest impropriety for me to discuss it. Men are so peculiar."

"You mean all these years you actually knew he kept a

mistress?" Amanda was aghast.

"Oh, no," Sally said once the waiter had removed their plates and brought the coffee and dessert. "I didn't find out until three years after we were married."

"It must have been a terrible shock," Amanda said, amazed at the calm way in which Sally referred to it.

"To be honest, it had quite the opposite effect," Sally said, taking a sip of coffee. "I felt tremendous relief."

"Relief?" Amanda was puzzled.

Sally eyed her over the rim of her coffee cup. "Knowing that Cecil was having an affair released me from all the guilt I was feeling about having one myself."

There was no doubt in Amanda's mind that she ought to be shocked, even appalled at this blasé admission, but curiosity made her ask instead, "With whom?"

"Gerald Gardner," Sally answered without hesitation, then sighed. Her eyes sparkled and her face became softer, warmer. "I was such an innocent when I married Cecil, and he never even came close to awakening me. It was Gerald who did that." She leaned closer and whispered excitedly, "The first time it happened, Mandy, I couldn't believe it. I felt things I had never even dreamed about in my wildest dreams, and I've had some pretty wild dreams."

The steaming coffee burned Amanda's tongue, but she hardly noticed it. The transformation on Sally's face and in her voice as she spoke of her lover was startling. At times Sally could appear hard, even cold, in spite of her effusive personality. None of those characteristics could apply to her now, Amanda thought. Sally's reference to an awakening and to powerful feelings that she had never experienced before had puzzled and disturbed Amanda, who was not sure what she meant. The sex act, as far as she was concerned, had turned out to be disappointing. She told herself Sally must be exaggerating what she felt in order to excuse her actions. The fact that Cecil kept a mistress didn't exonerate her own behavior. Eugenia would have condemned her as a scarlet woman, but Amanda felt no need to judge. She understood now how Sally and Cecil had managed to stay together, and the knowledge made her sad.

"We had to be discreet, of course," Sally went on softly.

"It wasn't likely Cecil would ever get wind of it. He never

leaves Yorkshire if he can help it, but Gerald's wife was dreadfully possessive and jealous." Blushing, she unconsciously smoothed a loose strand of hair out of her eye. "Once they had a terrible row and she went to stay with her mother in Dorset for three glorious weeks. He visited me in Paris. It was heaven."

"I seem to recall hearing that Gerald had gone to India," Amanda said musingly.

"He did," Sally replied briskly, snapping out of her reverie. "Two years ago. It was *her* doing. She knew he was seeing someone and wanted him out of harm's way. I was dreadfully down in the dumps at first, but Philip de le Mons helped to set me on my feet again. Philip isn't Gerald, but he is French and what the French don't know about amour . . ."

Having no wish to discuss any more of Sally's lovers, Amanda decided it was high time she thanked her for supper and left. Michael would be worried by now, and Eugenia . . . suddenly she felt exhausted.

"You may think I'm terribly forward, but an affair wouldn't do you any harm either," Sally said dryly. "It might put the color back in your cheeks again."

This time Amanda was embarrassed. "I don't think so. I'm not the type . . ."

"I wasn't either until I met Gerald," Sally interrupted. "After we became lovers, nothing Cecil could ever say or do upset me. In fact, believe it or not, our relationship actually improved. We became much more understanding and tolerant of one another."

"Sally, why are you telling me all this?"

"I feel my secrets are safe with you," Sally said confidently as she signaled for the waiter to bring the check. "You're not the gossiping type. In fact, I want you to know you're the only female I would ever trust with the sordid details of my life. I'm sure if anyone ever tried to worm the information out of you, you'd simply stare at them in that glacial manner you sometimes put on and clam up. I only wish," she added with a trace of wistfulness as they stood up, "that we could see more of each other."

Touched by this speech, Amanda warmly embraced her as they parted from the Café-Royal and promised she would try to attend tea that Sunday at Sally's house in Regent Street.

As she walked home, Amanda pulled up the collar of her black cloth coat, noting as she did so that it had turned quite dark and that there was a damp chill in the air. She shivered. The unexpected meeting with Sally and their extraordinary conversation had only added to her low spirits, forcing her to acknowledge that her own marriage was in serious trouble. Sally and Cecil's answer to a divorce had been to have affairs, but Amanda knew such a solution would never work for her, while the idea of divorce struck her as an act of disloyalty as well as cowardice. She had been brought up to believe the marriage vows were sacred. Having an affair would only confuse the issue, and it wouldn't help Michael to get on his feet and break away from his mother.

The only ray of hope, as she saw it, was to have a child, but even there a problem arose that so far had proved insurmountable. She had been unable to conceive. The consensus of the various doctors she had visited had been that although she was perfectly healthy, her womb was tipped. Perhaps that and the fact she was not relaxed enough were the problem. Unless, of course, they added delicately, it was due to some difficulty on her husband's part. Michael had not wanted to see a doctor. Nevertheless, she had kept after him. One evening, he had returned home late with the news that he had seen a doctor and had a clean bill of health. Convinced the problem must be her tipped womb and the tensions between them, she kept hoping the situation would change. The only change that occurred was in their deteriorating marriage. And in this area, their sex life had been the first to suffer. Michael's interest had gradually waned, except when he needed to be comforted. At first she had been somewhat relieved, because sex itself had proven to be uncomfortable and eventually boring. In the early days, she had felt a warm sensation in her loins and a tingling when Michael touched her breasts or stroked her thighs, but he never did so long enough before he climbed on top and entered her. Once or twice she had asked him shyly to continue touching her, but he could never do it for very long before his impatience got the better of him. She had long ago stopped asking. In any case, she didn't know what she had expected would happen if he had continued. Women were taught to lie still and put up with the physical side of their marriage. It was considered a man's pleasure. A woman was not ex-

pected to enjoy it. She should reconcile herself to the knowledge that from such an act children entered the world.

As Amanda turned down Hackett Lane, the image of Sally's radiant face as she discussed Gerald Gardner appeared in her mind. For a moment, she wondered if Sally knew something she didn't. "An affair wouldn't do you any harm either," Sally had said. Ashamed at the turn her thoughts had taken, she instantly dismissed them from her mind.

Chapter Three

MRS. REGINALD TYLER KEYES glanced at her reflection in the mirror above her oak dresser and smiled. It wasn't the smile of a beautiful woman who is particularly pleased by her appearance, although she knew that tonight she looked breathtaking in her stately gown of deep rose silk. To go with the gown, she had chosen to wear the Smirnoff diamond and ruby necklace and earring set Reginald had presented to her on the eve of their first anniversary. It had cost three hundred and eighty thousand dollars. The necklace was very heavy and not particularly beautiful. Helen had only worn it once before, feeling at the time that it might make her appear vulgar to exhibit such an expensive and gaudy item before the world. But tonight was different. Although officially it was to be the coming out party for her daughter, Sara, it was really a personal triumph for Helen. As such, she felt that the Smirnoff necklace was exactly the right choice. The jewels had a tragic and colorful history. There were some critics who said the wild tales were exaggerated and others who shook their heads and gleefully predicted gruesome disasters for the Keyes family now that they were in possession of the cursed rubies.

According to the legend, they had once belonged to a Russian countess. The unfortunate lady had a very jealous husband and was unwise enough to take a lover. When her husband discovered her deceit, he followed her to her lover's hunting lodge during a blizzard and shot them both, whereupon he apparently went mad with remorse and killed himself. The necklace and earrings were duly handed down to their

daughter, whose fiancé failed to turn up at the church on their wedding day. Unable to face the disgrace, she drowned herself in a lake on her estate. The jewels were then passed on to a young cousin, who shortly thereafter was burned alive in a terrible fire. After this, they vanished for ten years until they turned up in Germany in the possession of an arms manufacturer's wife. Because she was unable to produce a male heir for him, he divorced her. Feeling it was the fault of the Smirn-off rubies and not her, she sold them to a Dutch merchant. The following year she married again and in due course proudly gave birth to twin sons. It was from the Dutch merchant that Reginald purchased the jewels, but so far nothing catastrophic had occurred either to him or to any member of his family.

Reginald had fancied the jewels because of their unusual history and knew Helen would appreciate them because they had once belonged to royalty. At the thought of royalty, Helen smiled again. It was a smile of triumph. She had come a long way from her days as little Helen Brady of Newnan, Georgia.

Newnan, steeped in tradition like many southern cities, had been crippled after the Civil War. The young men who managed to find their way home discovered their graceful white homes burned to the ground, their crops devastated, and their futures bleak. Slowly, they picked up the pieces of their lives and struggled to survive, eking out a living off the mutilated land with their own hands; hands that had never before touched a hoe or a plow or chopped wood. Womenfolk, who had been taught to be nothing more than bright decorations for their men, worked alongside them in the fields. In the sultry evenings, they gathered on the rickety verandas they had rebuilt and talked about the glorious old days. When they referred to the Yankees it was with scorn and hatred. The Yankees had technically won the war, but they were inferior. They lacked refinement and taste. At best, they were vulgar money grubbers. At worst, they were thieves and murderers.

This was the world into which Helen Brady had been born. She had grown up among just such bitter, disillusioned people, where the threat of starvation still hung in the air. But their sense of failure and inability to face the future had not affected her. In Helen had been born a fire of ambition and a

dream of accomplishing great things, fed by tales of past glories and aristocratic lineage dating back to the English nobility. If she had been a boy, her single-minded purpose and powerful will would have assured her success in any field she entered. But as a female, her expectations were limited to one avenue, the marriage mart. She was beautiful, well bred, and accomplished and knew she could expect to make a comfortable marriage even in Newnan, but Helen didn't want to be merely comfortable. She wanted great wealth, and that meant leaving Newnan.

There was talk of huge sums of money being made up North. The Yankees seemed to turn out millionaires every year. Such men did not exist in Newnan, but Helen was smart enough not to confide her plans in those who would view them as treacherous. Instead, she begged her aunt, the only member of her family who had any money, to send her to a very exclusive finishing school in Philadelphia. It was here that she carefully cultivated northern friends and accepted invitations from them. She read up on the Astors, Vanderbilts, Morgans, and Whitneys. She acquired a vast knowledge of horses, theater, opera, and precious stones. Although her association brought her into contact with some of these august personages, she very soon discovered that she was not welcomed into their midst as she had imagined she would be. They saw her for what she was, a poor girl from the South looking for a rich husband, and they gave her the cold shoulder. When she managed to captivate a young cousin of the Whitneys, she was invited to his home by his parents. To her horror, they made it plain they thought she wasn't good enough to marry their son and added insult to injury by offering her a sum of money if she would leave him alone. Humiliated and too angry to speak, she left. Shortly thereafter they succeeded in removing their son from her influence by sending him to Europe. He was not sufficiently attached to remain firm in his resolve to marry Helen and eventually forgot all about her. Another girl might have felt defeated and abandoned her dreams of riches, but Helen wasn't like other girls. Her stubbornness paid off when she met Reginald Keyes, whose fortune was astronomical and whose family were all conveniently in their graves. He was not accepted by the Astors or Vanderbilts, but Helen realized she wasn't likely to do much better and she married

him. Her family disowned her until she offered to restore their plantation and their former way of life. The money and the power that her marriage brought eased the shame she felt at the contempt formerly bestowed on her by the first name families. The fact that, despite her wealth, she was still not accepted by them rankled deeply. One day, she vowed, she would bring them to their knees.

From the moment of that decision Helen schemed and let nothing stand in her way. Formulating a careful strategy, she began to set the first step of her plan into motion by creating a spotless image of a charitable, philanthropic, and cultivated family name. She made certain the Keyes name appeared in the press, relating how much they had donated to the orphans, the needy, universities, hospitals, struggling artists, and the like. She dressed with care and made sure her daughter was dressed with good taste and style. She spent large amounts of money on clothes and furnishings, but this fact was not printed in the newspapers. Instead, it was reported how generous she was with servants and how they loved her. The gourmet food and wine served at their parties, balls, and teas was also reported in detail, along with the fact that the Keyeses were superb hosts and extremely interesting, amiable people.

In order to initiate the second step in her plan, Helen waited eighteen years for the coming out party of her daughter. She knew that the only thing a millionaire in America was unlikely to possess was a title. By inviting to the party scores of single foreign aristocrats with very impressive coats of arms and titles before their names, she assured herself of the interest of every mother who possessed an unmarried daughter. But it was with deep regret that she informed them that she couldn't possibly invite their daughters to her ball, since she had never been invited to their homes. It would be a breach of etiquette. They understood and swallowed their pride, flooding her with invitations to teas and dinner parties. There would be no more humiliations, no more slights. Helen Bradley had finally vanquished all her foes. Knowing that in the next couple of weeks she would carry off a coup that would make them all green with envy added to her sense of exhilaration.

A knock on the door reminded her that it was getting late. The guests would be arriving soon. "Come in," she said briskly, picking up her fan. Reginald entered the room, carry-

ing with him an oblong box tied by a white ribbon.

"I had a feeling you would be playing the grande dame tonight," he said as he kissed her lightly on one scented cheek. "Now that I see you're wearing the Smirnoff rubies, I'm convinced I was right." Standing back, he scrutinized her for a moment and then added dryly, "You have the look of the cat who's not only eaten the cream but has eyes on the filet mignon. What crafty maneuver are you planning now?"

Although her color rose under Reginald's mocking gaze, tonight Helen was not annoyed at his uncanny ability to read her thoughts, nor did she take offense at the suspicion that he would view her success with mild contempt. Nothing could rob her of her sense of personal triumph. In the light of a magnanimous victor, she was able to overlook the sarcasm in his tone because she knew without him she would never have succeeded. In a way, she thought with amusement, he was her ally.

Even if Reginald had been ugly, boorish, and stupid, Helen would not have balked at their marriage. She would have found a way around these unfortunate traits. The fact that he had turned out to be eminently presentable and thus able to add to her own consequence pleased her. In her quest to fulfill her ambition, she had never once considered love to be a motivating factor in choosing a husband. Nor had she ever asked herself if she loved Reginald. Love was not something she had given much thought to. If she thought about it at all, Helen felt she regarded her husband with affection and esteem. In fact, she was wont to consider herself luckier than most women. She knew Reginald gambled and drank and undoubtedly frequented the company of low women, as other men did, but he never created a scandal or flaunted the creatures in front of her. For this she was grateful. Some women might have complained of neglect, but Helen was quite content to be left to her own devices. Reginald fulfilled his social obligations when pressed and in general conducted himself like a gentleman should, which was as much as she felt she had any right to expect. The only flaw in his character as she saw it was to exhibit from time to time a regrettable tendency to be sarcastic in his speech to her and to view her conquests in the social world with amusement.

Tonight Reginald looked particularly elegant. Helen felt he

did her proud, and in a rare rush of warm feeling she decided to take him partly into her confidence.

"Several people will be staying on for a month or so, including the earl of Chatham."

"I have the strongest feeling the other guests will also turn out to be earls, dukes, vicounts, marquises, and barons," Reginald said dryly. "I congratulate you, my dear," he added, bowing over her hand, "on scoring yet another point over your opponents, who doubtless will be falling over each other for an invitation to one of your parties."

"The earl is a delightful man," Helen said, pleased at what she felt had been a compliment. "The title has been in his family since William the Conqueror. He has an estate in Yorkshire and a castle in Ireland that sounds marvelously quaint."

"And which has also, unless I'm much mistaken, fallen into ruin through neglect and lack of funds."

"He is very personable, with excellent manners and a good deal of charm."

"All of which will aid him in his mission here," Reginald murmured in a voice that was beginning to sound bored.

Helen frowned. "What do you mean, his mission?"

"Come, come, my dear, you know as well as I do the earl isn't here to see the scenery. He probably borrowed the money on the expectation of making contacts with wealthy women with unmarried daughters who wouldn't balk at exchanging money for a coat of arms, no matter how tarnished."

"How cynical you are," Helen exclaimed. "There's no reason why he shouldn't meet a young girl here whom he finds agreeable, whether she has money or not, and the girl may think him charming."

"He may well find a vast array of pretty young girls agreeable," Reginald acquiesced, "but my intuition tells me it would be the height of folly for him to offer marriage unless they were wealthy. His creditors wouldn't like it."

"The way you present it, it sounds quite horrid," Helen complained. "when in actual fact, such marriages often work out for the best if each party respects the other's privacy and acts with civility and discretion."

"Marriages such as you describe," Reginald said coldly, "can have little appeal to an innocent young girl brought up on romantic novels."

"There are dozens of young girls who wouldn't mind at all being a countess," Helen said, stung by her husband's attitude, "including Sara."

At the mention of their daughter, Reginald's eyes narrowed slightly and Helen realized she had gone too far.

"I've never interfered before in your plots and schemes," Reginald said in an icy voice, "but I forbid you to involve Sara. She's our daughter, not a pawn in one of your social climbing games."

"I merely mentioned Sara as an example," Helen murmured, regretting the impulse that had led her to think Reginald would sympathize with her plans. In any case, she knew his support wasn't essential to her success. He was rarely at home anymore, and by the time he discovered what she had done, it would be a fait accompli. What she had in mind would certainly enhance her own position, but it was for Sara's ultimate benefit. Unlike Helen, Sara would never have to struggle to achieve wealth, social standing, and position. They would be handed to her on a gold plate. It never occurred to Helen that Sara might not dream the same dreams she had nurtured since the cradle. What girl wouldn't jump at the opportunity to be not just an heiress but a member of British royalty? But she had the good sense to keep these thoughts to herself.

There was a knock on the door and Sara and her eight-year-old brother, Charles, joined them, forestalling further conversation.

"I don't see why I can't spend the night at Eddy Daggert's house. His parents invited me," Charles complained, twitching in his formal attire.

"Tonight is your sister's eighteenth birthday party and coming out ball," Helen said severely.

"I already gave her a present," Charles pointed out in a long-suffering voice, "and she won't mind if I'm not there. It's only grownups anyway. They'll tell me how cute I am and the women will coo and want to kiss me," he added crossly.

Sara giggled.

"You have to make an appearance," Helen insisted, "for an hour or so."

"Then can I go to Eddy's?" he pleaded.

"Why not?" Reginald said laughing. "You deserve it."

"If you behave yourself," Helen agreed. "And don't spill things all over your new clothes or dump bugs into the laps of our guests," she added with a shudder, recollecting a recent incident.

Charles grinned. "I won't. I promise."

Turning her attention to Sara, Helen thought to herself that tonight, at least, she looked exceptionally lovely. Sara wasn't beautiful or even regal looking. She was dainty and delicate, with large, round blue eyes and lighter hair than her brother, and Helen had taken pains to see that tonight her daughter's gentle qualities were emphasized. Sara wore a white silk gown embroidered with shimmering silver threads, the neckline and hem sewn with seed pearls. The gown was pulled in tight at her slim waist and the sash was a shade of blue that matched her eyes. Her hair was done up in an elaborate, wavy coiffure. Adorning it was a diadem made of white roses, diamonds, and pearls. She wore a pair of pearl earrings presented to her by her mother in honor of her eighteenth birthday. Her shoes were white satin with diamond buckles. Tonight she was more than ordinarily excited, and the flush in her usually pale cheeks was very becoming.

"How do I look?" she inquired anxiously. "Is everything all right?"

"You'll have dozens of men falling in love with you," Charles predicted rashly, happy that this remark seemed to be well received by his sister.

"You look wonderful," Helen assured her.

"You look just like a fairy princess," Reginald said with a smile.

Sara laughed and then, noticing the package in his hand, she blushed, not liking to ask if it was for her and yet knowing quite well that it was.

"Your father has something for you," Helen said, breaking the suspense.

As Sara unwrapped the package, she gasped. Inside was a strand of perfectly matched pearls with a diamond clasp. They glittered in the dark velvet box. "Oh, Father, they're beautiful," she said as she kissed him and then handed them to him to fasten around her neck. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she asked shyly, "Can I keep them or are they just for tonight?"

"They're yours, sweetheart, to do with as you choose."

"We'd better get downstairs," Helen said. "The first guests will be arriving any minute now. 'Remember, Charles,' she warned, 'none of your pranks. Tonight you are a little gentleman. And, Sara dear, I hope you won't forget the difference between a curtsy you would bestow on a mere baron and one you would make to a count.'"

"No, Mama," Sara said nervously, filled anew with terror at the thought of her very own first ball.

Sara need not have worried. The party was a huge success. She never lacked for dancing partners, nor did any other single young lady. Unaware of her mother's machinations, Sara thought the evening the most wonderful of her life. She was whirled around the dance floor by one handsome young man after another, all of whom lavished her with compliments. But for all her innocence and naiveté, Sara was well aware that most of the pretty words and charming phrases whispered in her ear were the flattery men were expected to bestow on a young lady in whose honor the ball was. Her head wasn't turned or her heart moved until a rather ordinary young man of average height and slim build approached her for the next dance. To those who stood beside her, she appeared to treat him with as much courtesy and propriety as she had the others, but when she danced with Thomas Archibald Wyler, there was a flush on her cheeks and her eyes sparkled. A shrewd observer might have noticed that it seemed as if he held her closer than the movements of the dance required and that she responded to the embrace eagerly.

"My God, you look beautiful tonight," Tom said. Frowning, he added, "I suppose you're having a grand time dancing with all those swells."

"I would much rather be dancing with you the whole evening," Sara said so sincerely that all Tom's resentment melted. "It was Mama. She was adamant that I stand up for only one dance with each gentleman, and I couldn't very well protest or she would have suspected something and hammered at me until she found out the truth."

"I have to talk to you alone," Tom said grimly, leading her purposefully toward a pair of windows that led out onto a long veranda.

"If Mama sees us," Sara whispered, a note of real fear in

her voice, "she'll be furious."

"She's engaged in a tête-à-tête with the countess of Markham," Tom said. "She's not even looking this way."

"Tom, you are mad," Sara said with a nervous laugh once they were safe. "As soon as Mama notices I'm missing, she'll start hunting for us. And she'll be very angry."

"Well, what if she is," Tom said. "She won't eat us alive or burn us in oil or anything. I don't see why you don't just tell her about us. It's not as if I were a pauper or . . . or an actor or something. Even if I'm not in the same league as your folks, I'm not marrying you for your money."

"I know that, darling," Sara said shyly, using the endearment for the first time, "but Mama just needs time to get used to the idea."

"You mean she might think I'm not good enough for you," Tom said stiffly.

"Don't be silly," Sara said, knowing quite well that was exactly what her mother would think. Tom came from a large, comfortable, gregarious Long Island family whose fortune was only moderate and whose assets could not be found in the social columns of newspapers. "She just needs time to get used to the idea of me getting married, that's all."

"The way you always talk about your mother, anyone would think she was a dragon. She looks like a reasonable enough person."

"You don't know my mother," Sara insisted, unable to communicate the feeling of awe and dread she felt for this parent who could so easily reduce her to tears or incoherent stammering with a look or a sharp phrase.

"Here we are engaged and we can't tell a soul. I'm not even allowed to present you with a ring. Instead, I have to pretend I hardly know you and put up with those foreigners drooling all over you."

"Tom, you're jealous," Sara challenged, not at all displeased by this fact.

"Well, maybe I am." Tom muttered. "How would you feel if I were seen dancing with dozens of pretty girls and you overheard their mamas discussing which one of them I was most likely to marry?"

"That sort of tittle-tattle goes on all the time," Sara protested. "Besides," she added softly, "you know I don't care

for any of them." Grabbing his arm, she whispered excitedly, "I have a plan, Tom. Father is home now, and if I can enlist his aid, it won't matter what Mama thinks. He doesn't often cross her, but when he puts his foot down she listens. He's the only one Mama does listen to."

"All right, then," Tom relented, "we'll wait a little longer, but just so you don't forget all about me in that room full of dukes and princes, I'll leave you with something to remember me by." Taking her in his arms rather clumsily, he kissed her.

The music had already started for the next set, but Sara didn't hear it above the music in her own heart. Suddenly a drawling voice behind them intruded on their lovemaking.

"Excuse me, but I believe this dance is mine."

Embarrassed, the couple broke apart and Sara allowed herself to be returned to the dance floor on the arm of the earl of Chatham.

At the same moment that Sara and the earl joined the throng of dancers, Reginald was helping himself to rare roast beef at the buffet table. Vladimir Nabinsky appeared at his side. In much the same way that Reginald worked for the United States government, Vladimir worked for the Russian government.

"The party goes well, very well indeed," Vladimir said as he helped himself to more champagne and petit-fours. "I am honored that you should have included me on your guest list."

"I wouldn't have left you out for the world," Reginald assured him. "Whatever your faults, you aren't likely to bore me to death."

Vladimir chuckled and, lowering his voice, said in quite a different tone, "Our little excursion that rainy night in Sarajevo seems to have borne unhappy fruit."

"I heard last week that the archduke and his wife were assassinated," Reginald sighed. "It's too bad our warnings weren't taken seriously."

"It is even more unfortunate than you think," Vladimir remarked.

"What do you mean?"

"I have just come from Vienna," Vladimir explained as he sipped champagne. "The military refuses to be satisfied that the Serbian government is innocent of complicity in the crime. They insist the Black Hand was working with the Serbians,

even though the facts prove otherwise. General von Hotzen-dorf and the foreign minister, von Berchtold, are insistent on teaching Serbia a lesson. They desire a little war. It is my feeling," Vladimir said softly, "Vienna will make impossible demands on Serbia and then leap at the slightest resistance as an excuse to flex its military muscle."

Reginald watched Sara waltzing with the earl of Chatham and frowned. "If Austria-Hungary attacks Serbia, I grant you, it will present a very touchy situation."

"As a Russian," Vladimir said dryly, "I can safely say my country would not view the march of Austro-Hungarian soldiers into Serbia in a favorable light. Regrettably, Kaiser Wilhelm, despite being a cousin of our czar, would hardly take kindly to Russia's mobilization of troops on the eastern front. Germany's siding with her ally in Vienna will in turn cause alarm in France and England, who will be forced to follow suit."

"The picture you present," Reginald admitted "is a grim one, but so far nothing very alarming has taken place. Vienna has a right to be annoyed at the murder of the archduke and his wife, but they would have to be utter fools not to realize the consequences of an act of aggression against Serbia."

Vladimir smiled. "Perhaps I am being overhasty in jumping to conclusions, but I have little faith in the intelligence of a band of glory-seeking military elitists. I hope I am wrong, but the smell of war is in the air, my friend. Eventually the stench may even reach as far as your magnificent shores."

"I doubt that. Europe is far away and America is too concerned with its own affairs."

"I hope what you say is true," Vladimir said with a sigh as he put down his glass and helped himself to a petit-four. "If war does break out as I predict, I am afraid it will not be such a little war after all. Now excuse me while I pay my respects to your charming wife."

"Can't see why you encourage that fellow," Mason Hammond remarked as he joined Reginald. Mason, an old college friend, worked at the State Department. "Never met a foreigner yet I could trust once my back was turned. And," he added, lowering his voice, "with the political situation the way it is, we have to be particularly careful."

"Vladimir's a decent sort even if he is a Russian, and you

needn't worry," Reginald said dryly. "I don't trust anybody, not even you."

"You needn't overdo it," Mason muttered indignantly, his ruddy complexion turning ruddier still. "I'm on your side."

"Are you?" Reginald said in a bored voice. "And whose side are we on?"

"That's a queer sort of question," Mason declared.

"I've been thinking lately," Reginald confided, "that the work we do is rather pointless."

"How's that?" Mason was shocked.

"Very little of the information we pass on is used sensibly by the higher ups. Take the case of poor Avery. You found out he was being blackmailed by the Germans to pass on military secrets. Instead of taking action by removing Avery from his position, they fed him false information but continued to let him think he was passing on top secret plans. He ended up blowing his brains out. A tragedy like that could have been avoided."

"Nevertheless, you can't get away from the fact that John Avery was passing along information to the enemy." Mason pointed out. "Damn it, Reg, he was a traitor."

As more people began to crowd the buffet table, Reginald led Mason to a secluded corner of the room.

"Vladimir and I uncovered a plot to murder the archduke and his wife long before it ever happened and dutifully passed along the information to our superiors. I wouldn't be surprised if both Vienna and Serbia had heard of it before that and yet no action was taken. If the proper protection had been afforded the royal couple, the assassinations would never have occurred," Reginald said bitterly. "Don't fool yourself, Mason, our efforts in the world of espionage are futile."

"I realize John Avery was a friend of yours," Mason sighed, "and his suicide affected you badly, but what you're saying is absolute nonsense. Your job is important and valuable. What you have to keep in mind is that we are not in a position to make the decisions. Our superiors do that. We pass along the information and our responsibility ends at that level. What happens after that is none of our business. The people who make the decisions are trained to do so. And remember, we don't have all the facts at our disposal. They do."

"Ours is not to question why. Ours is just to do or die!"

"Stop brooding and feeling sorry for yourself. Pull yourself together. You have another assignment, and this time don't say you're not really needed," Mason said, frowning.

"Unless it's in New York, I'll have to refuse. I have some private affairs to look into," Reginald said, thinking of Sara.

"You can't refuse," Mason insisted, a note of desperation in his voice. "I'm asking you as a personal favor. The whole thing is top secret and very hush hush." He took a deep breath. "The plans for a deadly new weapon were stolen, and the British scientist who invented the devilish thing and was selling it to us was murdered—prussic acid was mixed in his best brandy. Nobody knows which country has the plans now, although they're pretty certain it's either Germany or Russia. The loss of the plans was bad enough, but the army is very heated up over the fact that there was a leak from inside. It was a project they kept heavily under wraps. Only a handful of people knew about this weapon, let alone the name of the scientist or the place the plans were kept." Mason glanced at Reginald uneasily. "I was one of those who knew on every count."

"I can see why you're so upset," Reginald acknowledged, "but why are you insistent on involving me? Eventually the leak will be located and your name will be cleared, unless of course you *are* responsible," he added wryly.

"This is not a joking matter," Mason complained bitterly. "I'm under the heaviest suspicion. My every move is watched and I've been removed from active duty. It's even worse for the ambassador. He was the one who made contact with Philips, the scientist. His career could go down the drain any minute, and he's a good man. To make matters infinitely worse," he said, his face turning purple with rage, "some nin-compoop assigned Willard Bartlett to the case."

"Good God!" Reginald exclaimed.

"He's convinced I'm guilty and is hounding me to death," Mason snapped. "Two nights before I left London, I returned home early from the opera to discover the sneaky little bastard snooping through my bedroom drawers. The idiot thought I was hiding some valuable piece of evidence in my underwear. I saw red and nearly choked the life out of him."

"Willard is an ass," Reginald admitted, "but surely he isn't the only one who's in on the case?"

Mason gritted his teeth. "You forget. Willard has two uncles who are generals and one who's a senator. He pulled strings and was given the assignment. It's his baby and his alone."

"That is unfortunate."

"Unfortunate," Mason snorted, running a trembling hand through his hair. "Hell, it's a disaster."

"In other words," Reginald said, "you want me to investigate on my own, without official approval?"

"It's an awkward situation," Mason admitted, "especially if Willard gets wind of what you're up to, but the ambassador agrees with me, some positive steps have to be taken. You and I both know Willard hasn't got the intelligence of an orangutan. While he's walking around in circles, reputations are being ruined and whoever leaked the information is still active."

"If I agree to take it on," Reginald said cautiously, watching Mason, "I would have to go in with an unbiased attitude. In other words, I would automatically suspect all the parties in the case, including you and the ambassador."

"That's understood," Mason said stiffly.

"Who else is involved, besides you and the ambassador?"

"Outside of the army general staff, there's only the ambassador's secretary, a boy by the name of Leyland Carter."

"And you think it might be him? Why?"

"I know damn well it wasn't me," Mason growled, "and as I mentioned before, the ambassador is a good man. He has no reason to turn into a traitor at so late a date. He has a personal fortune and a long career ahead of him once this is over. The secretary, on the other hand, has only been with the ambassador for a year and a half, and he's half German."

"Why does Willard think it's you?" Reginald asked curiously.

"He's hated my guts," Mason said, "ever since I recommended he be dismissed because of incompetence. The picture of me hanging my head in disgrace appeals to his nasty sense of revenge. The beggar probably tried hard to get this case just so he could pin it on me."

Reginald eyed Mason's flushed countenance with interest. "Willard is a fool and a pompous ass, but I find it difficult to believe he would go so far as to frame you. What about the in-

ventor?" he asked, changing the subject. "He must have had friends, relatives, even neighbors he might have talked to. One of them could have been greedy or just passed on the word innocently enough."

"It's not likely," Mason said. "The man was eccentric. He was estranged from his only child, a daughter he hadn't seen in years. He didn't have any friends and he lived in a run-down house right out of Dickens, with twenty-six cats. If you're thinking he was the type to gab to his neighbors about his latest inventions, you would be mistaken. He was on the worst possible terms with everyone. Visitors were unknown and he never went to church. In fact, he hardly went out at all. The house was in sad need of repair, but he wouldn't spend a shilling on it or on his own clothing. He dressed in rags and only ate enough to stay alive. Apparently the only things he spent money on were books, equipment for experiments, a gourmet wine cellar, and the cats, naturally."

"That avenue does sound pretty bleak," Reginald agreed.

"There's something else you should know," Mason said, coughing delicately. "I realize you're very upset over John Avery's death, and there's a slight connection between him and this case."

"What connection?" Reginald asked sharply.

"Count Rees-Shulberg arrived in London a week before the theft, and as far as I know, he's still there. As you may recall, it was thought at the time that he was the moving force behind the blackmailing of Avery."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Reginald said softly, his mouth hard. "The count takes particular pleasure in inflicting pain."

"Your Russian friend was there too," Mason said, and when Reginald didn't respond he burst out impatiently, "Well, what about it? Are you going to help or not?"

"I believe I will, on one condition."

"What sort of condition?" Mason demanded suspiciously.

"Whether I expose the leak or not, in a month's time I am free to return home."

"You know I have the greatest confidence in you, but all the same, Reg, a month is a very short time," Mason complained.

"Those are the terms," Reginald said firmly. "I'm not being difficult. I have my reasons," he added as his eyes sought

out and found his wife gaily talking to several royal dignitaries, among them the earl of Chatham.

"Very well, a month it is," Mason agreed grudgingly.

Helen sat at her dressing table in her beige satin robe, her long blonde hair tinged with faint traces of gray streaming down her back. She watched her maid turn down the covers of the bed, feeling excitement bubbling inside her so that she knew it would be impossible to sleep. It wasn't the champagne that made her feel so giddy, as if she were a young girl again. It was the smell of success that brought the flush to her cheeks and the sparkle to her eyes, the success and pride that came from fulfilling her life's ambition.

A faint knock at the door startled her. Her maid was equally surprised. It was very late. Everyone else had gone to bed hours ago. Reginald never came to her room anymore at night, and if he had wanted to speak to her, he would have knocked on their connecting door, not the one that led into the hall.

"I wanted to tell you in person what a splendid party it was," Basil, earl of Chatham, announced as he stepped into the room.

Helen was not pleased. She dismissed her maid, wide-eyed with curiosity. "Couldn't your praise have waited?" she whispered in annoyance. "It's four o'clock in the morning."

Basil sat down uninvited on the bed, lighting a cigarette. His cold green eyes moved over her until Helen found herself drawing the folds of her robe tighter about her. "You're still very attractive, you know."

"What do you want?" she demanded.

Basil shrugged. "There's an unexpected snag in our plans."

"What do you mean?" Helen said frowning.

"Earlier in the evening, while searching out Sara for our dance, I discovered her entwined in a rather passionate embrace with a young chap on the veranda."

"Who was it?" Helen said in astonishment.

"I haven't the foggiest notion. At the time, I thought it would be somewhat indelicate of me to ask his name, particularly since she seemed thoroughly embarrassed that I witnessed the scene."

"What did he look like?" Helen insisted.

"I'm afraid the best description I could offer is that he appeared to me to be quite ordinary in every department. Does this mean," Basil inquired in a bored voice that nevertheless betrayed undercurrents of tension, "that our pact is at an end?"

"Certainly not," Helen said sharply. "I can't imagine who Sara has become involved with, but it isn't important. She's too young to have formed any lasting passion. Besides, if it were serious I would have heard about it before this."

"Then everything will proceed as planned?" Basil asked as he rose, displaying marked signs of relief.

"Except that I think it would be best to rush things a bit," Helen said. "My husband is the only one who could upset our plans, and he's leaving for Europe in a few days. While he's away, we must make the most of the time we have. As soon as he leaves, I suggest you press your courtship. I shall personally speak to Sara, explaining how fortunate it would be to be a countess. Male visitors will be prohibited from visiting, and she won't be permitted to leave the house without me."

"I am profoundly thankful you are on my side," Basil laughed, "but Sara is young and the young tend to be stubborn in matters of the heart. If my adoration fails to win her over . . ."

"Sara will do as she is told," Helen assured him grimly. "I will see to it that there is only one avenue open to her—marriage to you. If she is foolish enough not to realize how very fortunate she is, then she must be made to see it by those who have her best interests at heart."

"And I will do my utmost to make my offer agreeable in Sara's eyes," Basil said. He hesitated. "There is only one small problem."

"Which is?" Helen asked impatiently.

"Regrettably some of my more pressing creditors have grown restless and doubt my ability to make good my debts. They are making embarrassing noises."

"If you present the bills to me tomorrow," Helen said curtly, "I shall see they are paid. Once you are married, you will have no need to worry. We will be very generous with Sara. I doubt if her settlement will be less than six million, not counting the jewels and other wedding gifts. However, this is all contingent on your keeping up your end of the bargain."

There must be no scandals, no scenes, no private parties. While you are in this country and in my house, you must conduct yourself with dignity and discretion. Do we understand each other, my lord?"

Basil's green eyes gleamed. He bowed low over Helen's hand as he took his leave. "Indeed we do, madam. I am honored to be allied to your generous family," he said breathlessly.

Chapter Four

REGINALD CROSSED THE marble floor of the Ritz Hotel in London and stood in front of the small, balding man at the desk. "I would like a room for a month's stay."

The desk clerk, who was bent over the register, stiffened and was about to reply curtly that he should try a less well known establishment. No one entered the Ritz without first making a reservation. Looking up, he changed his mind. His long, narrow face broke into a smile of welcome. "Mr. Keyes, what a pleasant surprise."

"I didn't have an opportunity to make a reservation before leaving New York," Reginald said. "I realize that was remiss of me. If you're full up, I'll try the Savoy."

Cesar Ritz was at that moment in Paris, but he had left instructions with his employees that there should always be an empty suite available for emergencies. There was no doubt in the clerk's mind that this situation constituted an emergency. This was their busiest season. The hotel was full, but Mr. Keyes was not only a most desirable guest but a personal friend of Cesar's.

"There's no need to look elsewhere," he assured Reginald quickly. "As it happens, there is a suite of rooms facing the park. Number twelve-oh-three," he said without hesitation as he handed the key to the bellhop. "I hope you will have a very pleasant stay, sir."

At that moment, several gentlemen strolling in the lobby were captivated by a tall, graceful young woman in her early twenties. She had pale, ivory skin and prominent cheekbones.

Her silky, golden hair had been gently swept up into a chignon at the nape of the neck. She had light green, almond-shaped eyes with thick lashes that gave her face an Oriental cast. The other women in the lobby appeared drab and colorless by comparison. Standing next to the desk with her back to Reginald, she seemed to be unaware of the glances of admiration she inspired. Leafing through some brochures describing the sights of London, she gave a slight start at the mention of Reginald's name by the desk clerk. Her odd, light green eyes followed him as he passed her on his way to the elevators. There was a curious expression on her face that might have been fear or excitement.

Deeply immersed in plans for flushing out the traitor so he could return home as quickly as possible, Reginald was oblivious to the interest his presence had created in the striking young woman.

Once he reached his room, decorated in champagne and blue brocade, he set about unpacking. He could have had the hotel valet service perform this task, but he wanted no one else about as he reviewed the different aspects of the case before meeting two of the prime suspects that evening at dinner. He had almost finished unpacking when there was a faint knock at the door. He frowned. It was too early for Mason and the ambassador. Besides, they had agreed to meet him at the restaurant. He was expecting no one else. The knock was repeated, this time more vigorously. Opening the door, Reginald saw a young man in his late twenties with a waxed blond moustache. He was sweating and appeared to be nervous.

"Yes?" Reginald inquired politely.

"Mr. Keyes?" he asked hesitantly in a well-educated voice with a faint trace of an accent. "I . . . my name is Leyland Carter. I work for the ambassador, and I would like to speak to you for a moment if you don't mind."

As Reginald stepped aside, he wondered at the secretary's presence. Both the ambassador and Mason had thought it best to leave him in the dark regarding Reginald's involvement in the case until it was absolutely necessary to include him. As far as they were concerned, Carter was guilty and there was no point in alarming him until Reginald had acquired adequate proof of his traitorous activities. Reginald had not been convinced of his guilt. "Nasty night," he said sympathetically.

"Would you care for a drink? I can ring for room service to send up a bottle."

"No, thank you," Leyland Carter said awkwardly. "I don't drink."

Taking a seat, Reginald motioned to another chair opposite him. After a moment's hesitation, Carter sat down. He unbuttoned his overcoat but made no move to remove it and sat stiffly on the edge of the chair peering at Reginald, his blue eyes squinting as if he were nearsighted.

"The ambassador has no idea I'm here."

"Indeed!" Reginald exhibited mild interest.

"I know why you've come," Carter muttered, his long bony fingers nervously picking at the threads of the armrest. "I overheard the ambassador discussing your arrival and the purpose for your visit with Mr. Hammond. They think I'm the traitor."

"Are you?" Reginald asked politely.

"I had nothing to do with the murder of Philips or the theft of the plans. I would never have done anything to damage my career in such a disgraceful manner." He sounded indignant and a little frightened.

"I have no authority in the case. Willard Bartlett is the man you should talk to," Reginald said.

Leyland Carter shifted restlessly on the chair. "I'm sure Mr. Bartlett is capable in his way, but so far he hasn't made much progress. Frankly, time is running out for all of us." His hands tightened on the armrest. "I am just as anxious as the others for this dreadful matter to be settled. In fact, solving this case is of even more vital importance to me than it is to the ambassador or Mr. Hammond."

"Really?" Reginald said, raising his eyebrows slightly.

"Unlike them," the young man said in a strained voice, "I am not independently wealthy. If the guilty party is never apprehended and I am not completely exonerated, the resulting suspicion will destroy my career."

"But if the case is not resolved," Reginald pointed out, "you won't be the only one under suspicion."

"Very true, but I have been in service to the ambassador for a very short period of time and I am not an American. People may not say so in words, but they will believe in their hearts that I am the traitor. Already I see what will happen. On some

flimsy pretext I will be dismissed. Word travels fast in diplomatic circles," he said bitterly, "and it will be next to impossible to secure another decent post. My livelihood is at stake as well as the honor of my name."

There was a note of real desperation underneath the stiff formality of Leyland Carter's words that did not escape Reginald.

"I have no theories," he said gently. "If it makes you feel any better, I had every intention of interviewing you at a later date for your version of what happened. I have no preconceived ideas."

Carter flushed. "I was afraid that Mr. Hammond might have given you an unfortunate impression of my character. That is why I came to see you on my own. I have nothing to hide. I would like you to question me on any matter relating to the incident. I assure you, Mr. Keyes, I will be most cooperative." He sat back and carefully folded his nervous hands in his lap.

"The questions I put to you might make you angry", Reginald said slowly.

Carter sat up straighter. A muscle in his left cheek twitched convulsively and then stopped. "If the ambassador and Mr. Hammond see fit to answer your questions, so can I."

"Very well, then. Let us begin with your heritage. Is it true you are part German?"

"Quite true," Carter said, flushing again. "I am not ashamed of it. My mother was German and my father Canadian."

"Do you have any German friends or relatives you are in contact with here?"

"None."

"None at all?" Reginald inquired in a skeptical tone of voice.

"Since I left Canada six years ago," Carter explained, "I have lost touch with relatives and childhood friends. I continued to write to my mother but she passed away two years ago. My father died when I was eighteen. Moreover, we had very few German friends or relatives. My father met my mother while on vacation in Hamburg and after a quick courtship married her and brought her home with him. She was seventeen at the time and never went back to Germany."

"What about friends you made in England?"

"My job is a very demanding one," Carter said shortly.

"Are you implying," Reginald murmured, "that on your own time off you remain cooped up in your room and that the entire time you have been in England you have not made one friend?"

The young man's hands began to twitch. "I . . . I don't make friends easily." Glancing at Reginald he added reluctantly, "About six months ago I met a young lady. She's British. Her father is a doctor. We were friends. But it didn't last. Her father didn't approve. We haven't seen each other for three months." His voice trailed off.

"Who do you think is the traitor?" Reginald asked abruptly.

"I have no idea," Carter said primly.

"Not even a wild guess?"

"Mr. Hammond is a more likely suspect than the ambassador," Carter said after a long pause, a note of defiance in his tone, as if he expected Reginald to argue the point.

"What about the ambassador? Does he have any German or Russian leanings?"

"If anything he is an Anglophile," Carter said. "He detests the Germans and has only contempt for the Russians. The only reason he hired me was because he was in desperate need of a secretary, and he felt I was more Canadian than German. But he never completely trusted me," he added unhappily, "as events have now proved."

"Perhaps the ambassador let slip some piece of information without realizing it," Reginald suggested.

"On the contrary," Carter insisted, "he is not a stupid man, nor is he inclined to idle chatter."

"How did he first come on to Philips? Were they friends?"

Leyland Carter smiled thinly. "Philips was a very strange creature. Under ordinary circumstances, he would never have come into contact with the ambassador. It was Philips who made the first move. He wrote a rather incoherent letter to the ambassador asking for an appointment. The ambassador is a very busy man. He had no idea who Philips was and replied that he was otherwise engaged for several weeks. Philips appeared one day while we were in the middle of dictation and demanded an audience. To avoid a scene, the ambassador

allowed him ten minutes. Philips laid a bare outline of the plans on the table and didn't beat about the bush. He wanted twenty thousand pounds, in return for which he would hand over his plans for a new weapon."

"And the ambassador accepted his offer on the spot?" Reginald asked curiously.

"Certainly not," Carter replied. "The ambassador is no fool. He thought Philips was a crackpot, but he felt he owed it to his country to check the offer out. Once a reputable naval scientist went over the sketch, it was evident Philips's invention was worthy of further consideration. I was sworn to secrecy, and I did not communicate with anyone about the project," he added, peering at Reginald earnestly.

"Why didn't Philips approach the British government about his invention?"

"He felt the British wouldn't pay him. Philips thought they would insist he give it to them out of a feeling of patriotism or for a very nominal fee. He wanted money. The ambassador and I both were under the impression that if we didn't agree to his demands, he would try to sell it elsewhere."

"No money was ever exchanged. Is that right?"

Leyland Carter licked his lips nervously. "He was murdered before the negotiations ever reached that point."

"Why do you suspect Mr. Hammond?" Reginald asked suddenly. "Because he is the only other party in the case?"

Carter stared at his hands, which were still folded in his lap. He frowned. "There was a woman involved," he said, disapproval evident in his manner and tone of voice.

"What woman?" Reginald asked in surprise. This was the first he had heard of a woman.

"One of Philips's neighbors, Mrs. Cranshaw, noticed a well-dressed young woman entering his house on the night he was murdered."

"What does she have to do with Mr. Hammond?" Reginald spoke sharply. He was annoyed at the thought that Mason had deliberately left this piece of information out of their conversation."

"Mr. Hammond," Carter sniffed, "frequents the company of a young widow by the name of Ellen Mansfield. She answers to the description of the woman who visited Philips."

"Who is she?"

"Her husband was a friend of Mr. Hammond's, and he has . . . kept her since her husband's death five years ago."

Reginald thought he knew Mason better than the secretary did, but this was the first he had heard about his friend's mistress. If true, it shed a new light on Mason, whom he had always thought of as a stuffed shirt, and provided another avenue of exploration that could prove embarrassing to his friend. "How is it you are in possession of such intimate knowledge concerning Mr. Hammond's life?" he queried suspiciously. "I've never heard of this Mrs. Mansfield."

Carter shrugged. "If you lived in London, you would hardly fail to hear it. A liaison like that is extremely difficult to keep from the public eye, besides which," he added with distaste, "Mr. Hammond takes no trouble to hide it. He buys the woman extravagant gifts and escorts her everywhere. There is even a rumor he intends to marry her once his wife, who has been seriously ill for some time, dies. That, of course, would be most unfortunate. She is an inferior person."

"Were Mrs. Manfield's movements on the night of Philips's murder checked into?" Reginald asked.

"Mr. Hammond was very angry that her name was brought into it at all," Carter admitted resentfully. "He claimed she was with him the entire evening," he added in a voice that clearly indicated he felt Mason had lied.

"What about the ambassador?" Reginald said, deciding to pursue another tack. "Does he have any unsuitable liaisons?"

"The ambassador," Leyland insisted, "is a prudent man. He is very ambitious and would do nothing to jeopardize his public image. In any case, he has an excellent wife who would not put up with any other attachments."

Reginald eyed the secretary curiously, wondering if his loyalty to the ambassador was genuine or whether it was simply a sound political move. Apparently Mrs. Mansfield's existence was real, but whether or not she was a scheming adventuress out to hook Mason or betray him remained to be seen. One thing was clear. Leyland Carter believed Mason was involved, either used as a dupe by his mistress or at his own initiative. Mason was equally convinced the secretary was behind it. From all that Mason had told him, the ambassador agreed with him, but Reginald attributed that to the ambassador's distrust of Germans.

"I understand you claimed to have been alone in your room the night Philips was murdered and the plans stolen?"

"Yes . . . I was alone," Carter admitted unhappily.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Reginald said, standing up suddenly, startling the young man. "I shall be in touch with you again very soon," he added coolly as he escorted the secretary to the door.

"If . . . if there is anything more . . ." Carter stammered, obviously disconcerted by Reginald's abrupt ending of the interview.

"I will get in touch with you," Reginald assured him. Returning to the bedroom, he realized the unexpected interview, though interesting, had taken up three-quarters of an hour, and he would have to hurry to make his dinner appointment with Mason Hammond and the ambassador. Now he was more anxious than ever to talk with them at length about the case. He was eager to see their reaction to the secretary's suspicions and to listen to their version of the events, particularly in relation to Mrs. Mansfield.

Maison Le Coeur had a reputation as a moderately priced French restaurant that served excellent food. There was an absence of gilt, red velvet, candelight, and shadows. During dinner, there were no strolling violin players. After dinner, there was no show. The waiters were efficient and polite. The most frequent and steady patrons were members of the middle class, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and retired army men. Occasionally, members of the aristocracy also showed up, but they were accorded no special privileges and had to wait their turn for a table if they had no reservations. Mason had deliberately chosen this sedate, out-of-the-way restaurant as their initial meeting place in the hope of avoiding the notice of Willard Bartlett.

As Reginald was leaving the hotel, he bumped into a drably dressed young woman carrying a package that fell to the ground when they collided. Retrieving it, he offered her his apologies and noticed that she was very pretty.

"Thank you," Amanda Powell said shyly and then, because she was embarrassed by the gentleman's bold stare, hurried off in search of the American lady who had commissioned her to make a new silk suit.

For a brief moment, as he stood outside waiting for the

doorman to hail a cab, Reginald's thoughts dwelled on the young woman. Her honey-colored hair, deep set, brown eyes, and gentle features had appealed to him. He sighed and wished he had not been in such a hurry. But almost immediately such pleasant thoughts were replaced by more serious ones, and before he had reached his destination, Reginald had forgotten all about her.

Mason and the ambassador were sitting at a table in the rear, a bottle of wine between them. They looked tense. As Reginald approached the table, they stood up.

"Glad to see you, Reg. I believe you've met the ambassador," Mason said with a smile.

Ambassador Rivington-White shook Reginald's hand with just the right amount of firmness. "We met at the Lawson's party last April," he said in a deep baritone. "I must say, I'm terribly relieved you've decided to help us out in this unhappy situation."

There was an eagerness to please, a charm that appeared to ooze without conscious effort from politicians, that grated on Reginald's nerves. It never failed to make him suspicious of their sincerity. The ambassador was no exception. His steel gray hair, military moustache, and even, white teeth worked together to present a portrait of an honest, dedicated public servant. The manner in which he shook Reginald's hand and gazed into his eyes without blinking intimated that although he was in a mess, it was not of his own making and that he had every expectation and the greatest confidence Reginald would extricate him from the quagmire.

"All of my friends call me Bradford," he said, beaming at Reginald, thus seeking to establish the fact that they were practically blood brothers.

Reginald graciously accepted the honor and said, "I'm sorry I'm late, gentlemen, but I was detained at the hotel by an unexpected visitor."

"I was under the impression," Mason said, frowning, "that no one was to know you were here."

"You needn't glare at me in that unattractive fashion, Mason," Reginald drawled as he sipped his wine. "It wasn't due to any slip of mine that Leyland Carter discovered I was staying at the Ritz."

The ambassador seemed more disconcerted than Mason. "I

said nothing to the boy," he insisted defensively. "Mason and I agreed to keep him in the dark, and I never said a word to him."

"Nor did I," Mason said, puzzled.

"Mr. Carter apparently overheard you and Mr. . . . Bradford discussing my arrival and decided to take matters into his own hands by presenting himself for interrogation."

"Did he confess?" the ambassador asked hopefully.

"Is that what you expected?"

"Of course he didn't confess," Mason said irritably. "Nobody in their right mind would admit willingly to traitorous activities. He probably went to Reg hoping to convince him of his innocence."

The ambassador's face fell. "Poor lad. He was always an excellent secretary. Carried out his duties very efficiently. I'll have a hard time replacing him."

"If that's true," Reginald said, "why are you so eager to put the noose around his neck?"

"I'm sorry for the boy," the ambassador said gravely, "but that doesn't mean I'm not convinced of his guilt. I am. After all, he is half German and blood always tells. It goes without saying," he added briskly, "it couldn't be anyone else."

"When I took on this assignment," Reginald reminded them, "it was with the understanding that I would approach the case free from bias. You may believe in Carter's guilt, but I am still far from convinced."

"A very proper attitude," the ambassador murmured.

"Carter has no alibi for the evening Philips was murdered," Mason said shortly.

"He says he was in his room," Reginald agreed. "Whether or not he was telling the truth is open to question, but then all of your alibis are equally weak."

"My dear sir," the ambassador began in a wounded voice.

"What I should like to know," Reginald said, coming straight to the point, "is why you thought it best not to mention the existence of Mrs. Mansfield, Mason?"

The ambassador looked embarrassed and began twisting his gold signet ring. Mason stiffened and his nose, not his most attractive feature, seemed to swell to twice its size as it turned an angry red. "She has nothing to do with this case, and I'll thank you to leave her out of it."

"I beg to differ with you," Reginald said firmly. "The little

I gleaned from Carter informed me that she plays a major role in your alibi and may very possibly be under suspicion herself."

"That's absurd, simply absurd," Mason sputtered. "She . . . Ellen and I are old friends. I merely wished to protect her name when I told you I was alone that night. As for the insinuation," he added darkly, his eyes narrowing, "that she visited Philips and slipped him prussic acid, it's a filthy lie. If you ask me, that sneaky little sniveling brute Carter paid the old lady to say what she did just to throw dust in people's eyes. Ellen is completely innocent, just as the ambassador and I are. It's Carter whose the guilty one, and you're a fool if you don't see it," he ended angrily.

The ambassador cleared his throat. "This affair has put a terrible strain on all of us."

"I'm not throwing accusations about to deliberately offend you," Reginald said with a sigh. "I'm simply trying to clear matters up. I must be in possession of all the facts, and that means both of you have to be honest with me regarding your movements on the night in question, no matter how awkward it is. As I mentioned to you, Mason, my time here is limited and cooperation is essential. Acting outraged at the very mention of Mrs. Mansfield's name is ridiculous and you know it."

"He's right," the ambassador said uneasily. "We must cooperate."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Bradford," Reginald said quietly. "You must realize that your alibi is just as unsound as Mason's."

The ambassador looked dismayed. "I'm afraid . . ."

"According to the report Mason wrote up for me," Reginald said wearily, "you said you had gone for a walk, despite the fact that it was pouring rain, and returned home alone fifteen minutes later. You let yourself in with your own key. None of the servants remember your coming in. Your wife was visiting friends and didn't return until very late, therefore she could not verify your story. You could easily have paid a visit to Philips, coaxed him into having a drink, slipped some prussic acid into it when he wasn't looking, and stolen the plans. It stands to reason that no matter how eccentric he was, Philips would have opened the door to you."

The waiter chose that moment to approach the table for their order. It was in an atmosphere of strained formality that

the three men chose their dishes. Once the waiter had departed, Mason glared at the tablecloth and drank heavily in gloomy silence. The ambassador frowned at the silverware and moved it about on the table, then proceeded to move it back to its original position. He glanced at Mason briefly, then back at his silverware.

Reginald took another sip of wine and decided to give them time to make up their minds which way they wanted it to be. Either they would be truthful with him or they would let Willard Bartlett continue to muddle his way through the case. Personally, he didn't care which option they chose.

"I know," the ambassador said in a carefully modulated voice, "that anything we hear at this table will be kept strictly to ourselves." He paused, taking a deep breath. "Willard has no idea. I . . . I didn't think it necessary to tell him about this lady friend of mine. I wouldn't mention it now if I didn't think it necessary," he added, avoiding Mason's look of cynical amusement. "She's a dancer at the Gilded Lily. I brought her a present the night Philips was murdered. It was her birthday, you see," he explained, beginning to break out into a cold sweat. "Her name is May, May Varrick. If you ask her, she'll corroborate my story, but I hope it won't come to that. My wife . . ." he winced, "has no idea."

"Your wife needn't know," Reginald assured him, imagining the look of incredulity on the secretary's face had he overheard this confession. Reginald had few illusions. He knew May, whoever she was, could undoubtedly be persuaded to lie if several pound notes were pressed into her hand, but he didn't think the ambassador was lying. Bradford Rivington-White seemed to be more terrified his wife would discover a paramour than of being accused of murder and traitorous activities. That left Mason, his mistress, and Leyland Carter. He would have to interview Mrs. Mansfield himself, whether Mason like it or not, before he could come to any definite conclusions. A vague uneasiness pricked him. He felt there was a fact that he was not yet in possession of that was the key to the whole affair.

"Damn!" Mason muttered under his breath. "That's all we need."

It took only a moment for the ambassador and Reginald to realize that Mason's exclamation was directed at the figure approaching their table.

"What a surprise," Willard Bartlett said in his New England twang. Without being asked, he drew up a chair and sat down.

"I had no idea you were in London," he added, flashing Reginald one of his famous smiles. "Quite a coincidence."

"Quite!" Reginald said, suppressing his annoyance.

Nature had blessed Bartlett with the kind of suave good looks that women found very attractive—until they spent ten minutes in his company. He was tall and slim with a mane of thick, wavy, black hair and brilliant blue eyes. When he spoke, his chin jutted out aggressively. He never failed to laugh at all the inappropriate moments and, when he wasn't being boring, made crude jokes that embarrassed everyone. Bartlett was one of those people whose palms are always sweaty and who talks to you while his eyes are constantly roaming around the room looking for more impressive contacts. Although he had been groomed for a diplomatic post by his socially ambitious family, Bartlett had been unable to rise very far in this field. He was jealous of those who had gone further than he.

"I suppose," Bartlett said after a heavy silence, "that you have been informed of the Philips affair." He drew out a cigarette and, after lighting it, sat back, contemplating them all with smug pleasure. Reginald wondered what he was up to.

"There's no reason why he shouldn't know," Mason said testily. "Everyone else in the department does."

"Still, Mason old stick," Bartlett said, leaning forward and speaking in the manner of a parent to an erring child, "I should think the department would be terribly disturbed if they knew you were going about blabbing our affairs all over the place. You always did have a tendency to let your tongue run away with you, especially when you've had a bit too much bubbly."

Mason's color deepened to an alarming shade of purple. Bartlett leaned back, oblivious to the state of agitation he had reduced Mason to and, flicking an ash off his lapel, said with a wink in Reginald's direction, "The less said about it the better, eh?" He turned his attention to the ambassador, who was eying him with distaste.

"I'm sure you'll be relieved to hear, Mr. Ambassador," he said with a smile, "that tonight all your troubles have come to an end."

"How's that?" the Ambassador said uneasily.

"Willard Bartlett has solved the case," he said, unable to sound anything but pompous, "and your reputation remains above reproach."

"The hell you have," Mason snapped.

Willard looked pained. "We've had our little differences in the past," he admitted sadly, "but I had thought, Mason, that you would be a bigger man than to hold a petty grudge against me, especially now that I have cleared your name despite considerable circumstantial evidence against you."

Mason glared at him and the ambassador stared in disbelief. It was up to Reginald to ask the obvious.

"My congratulations, Willard. I take it Leyland Carter is the guilty party?"

"Yes," Willard agreed, momentarily let down that Reginald had reached this conclusion on his own. "I thought all along there was something strange about the boy," he confessed. "He was always so nervous when I questioned him, and then, as the ambassador pointed out, he is half German."

"You didn't seem to feel that way a week ago," Mason reminded him bitterly. "I was the most likely candidate then."

"I do hope," Willard said, frowning, "you won't be so tedious as to hold it against me forever. It would be awkward if we have to work together in the future."

"God forbid!" Mason muttered between gritted teeth.

"What sort of proof have you got against Carter?" the ambassador asked curiously. "I'm assuming you do have proof."

"Naturally," Willard said, preening. "To begin with, we found a couple of hundred-pound notes stuffed into an old shoe."

"We?" Mason said, frowning. "What do you mean we?"

"The police and I."

"The police!" the ambassador repeated in an awful voice. "Good heavens, Willard. Don't tell me you involved the police in a matter of this kind?"

"I couldn't very well keep them out," Willard said, annoyed. "They were the ones who discovered the body."

"Do you mean the body of Carter?" Reginald asked, stunned.

Willard nodded. "He committed suicide. I suppose he real-

ized I was on to him and he couldn't face the music. He shot himself with his own revolver. It was very messy too. His desk was covered with blood. Well, what do you think of that?" he asked, stubbing his cigarette out with one long, slender finger.

"Did he leave a note?" the ambassador asked hopefully.

"Nothing elaborate," Willard said regretfully. "Just the usual stuff. He admitted his guilt all right and said he was sorry. Pathetic, really. I was meeting a friend here, but when I saw you I came straight over. I thought you'd like to know."

"That was very decent of you," the ambassador said generously.

Willard smiled and inclined his head in modest acceptance of praise well deserved.

"I see my guest has arrived," he said, glancing toward the entranceway, "and your dinners are here, so I'll be off."

"I suppose everything was aboveboard," Reginald inquired suddenly as Willard stood up.

"You can check into it yourself if you like," Willard said stiffly, "but you'll find it to be an open-and-shut case."

"Yes, yes, nothing very surprising about Carter being the guilty party. We suspected it all along," the ambassador said hastily.

Reginald let this pass and waited while Willard left to join an attractive lady friend before he broached the subject once more.

"I find it a strange coincidence that Carter should have come to me today pleading his innocence only to shoot himself a little while later."

"Poor devil was probably riddled with guilt," the ambassador said gravely. "He came to you thinking he could pull the wool over your eyes, but by the time he got home, he realized it was hopeless and lost his nerve. I feel sorry for him, but it stands to reason I'm grateful it's all over. I shall have to choose my secretaries with more care in the future. No foreigners. You can be sure of that," he added grimly, cutting into his steak.

Glancing at Mason, Reginald saw that he was in accord with this simplistic version of events. He thought it highly unlikely either of them would be open to the idea of Carter's death being anything more than an admission of guilt. Intuition warned him that it was something else entirely.

"Your secretary came to me of his own accord," he said, frowning. "When he left, I had no idea he contemplated doing away with himself."

"You couldn't have known what was in the boy's mind," the ambassador said kindly.

"After all," Mason said, "he was a traitor and a murderer. Don't forget that, Reg. His committing suicide was an extremely fortunate thing all around."

It was certainly a very fortunate thing for the ambassador and Mason, but Reginald remained silent. It was no longer his affair. Feeling he was being watched, Reginald casually glanced around the room and found Willard's lovely companion staring at him. She smiled and whispered something in Willard's ear that made him laugh.

"Willard's taste in women is flawless," Reginald said admiringly.

"Quite a dazzler, isn't she?" the ambassador agreed.

Willard always was one for the ladies," Mason said, "although what they see in him is beyond me."

"Now that the case is solved," the ambassador said with a sigh of contentment as he finished his wine and sat back, a rosy glow spreading over his cheeks, "I suppose you'll be returning home on the next boat? Mason tells me you weren't too anxious to come in the first place."

"While I'm here, I might as well stay for a while," Reginald replied casually, noting that both Mason and the ambassador seemed far from overjoyed at this news.

The remainder of the meal was pleasant enough. Mason and the ambassador took turns telling risqué stories and appeared to have made a silent pact not to mention either Philips or the secretary.

Later, alone in his room, Reginald wondered why he had said he would remain in London when it was far more practical and expedient to return home at once. He knew his wife wouldn't let the grass grow under her feet. If she had serious intentions of marrying Sara off to an English nobleman, she would already have set the first step of her plans into motion. He frowned, annoyed at himself. Even if he believed the secretary's suicide was doubtful, it was no longer his problem. Slipping in between the cool sheets, he tried to sleep but kept tossing and turning. His mind refused to be still. The vision of the

secretary's anxious face, pleading with him to believe in his innocence, kept appearing in front of him. Sighing, Reginald glanced at the clock. It was three A.M. Exasperated, he got out of bed and lit a cigarette. The secretary had not struck Reginald as a man driven by guilt and remorse to the point where a couple of hours after meeting him he would do away with himself, leaving a confessional note. It was too pat.

If Leyland Carter had been murdered and his murder deliberately devised to look like suicide, then someone else was behind the leak and that someone was very dangerous. He would continue passing secret information and a lot of damage could be done, especially with the situation in Europe so perilously close to war. Reginald felt he had to know the truth. He had been prepared to spend a month in London, and if necessary he would. Tomorrow he could start making a few discreet inquiries. Investigating Mrs. Mansfield would be high on his list.

Chapter Five

PHILIPS HAD LIVED in a neighborhood that was once the pride of prosperous, middle-class homeowners, but they had gradually deserted it, leaving behind them a succession of cheap rooming houses and tenements interspersed by a smattering of run-down private homes like the one Philips had owned. Garbage littered the streets. The houses all needed a new coat of paint and major repairs, but as Reginald walked down the street, he noted that the windows were all sparkling clean and had freshly laundered curtains waving in the summer breeze. Each tiny plot of land that constituted a piece of private property had been utilized by the owners, who still clung to the memory of a respectability that had long since vanished. Roses, daisies, and violets grew in mass profusion. Boxes of geraniums and lavender adorned the window sills. It was as if the owners, in a last desperate act of defiance, industriously tilled the earth in a vain hope of staving off the encroaching poverty they saw all about them.

Mrs. Cranshaw, Reginald discovered, belonged in the homeowner category. At first she refused to open the door more than an inch, thinking he was either a salesman or a bill collector. When he informed her he was neither of these but a relative of the deceased Mr. Philips, she suddenly became both friendly and voluble, insisting that he join her in her parlor for tea.

"My Henry would give me a regular tongue lashing if he knew I had opened my door to a stranger, much less let him in," she confided as she led Reginald through the narrow

hallway. "It's no wonder," she sighed, "things the way they are. It was bad enough with all the burglaries but now . . . murder." She shuddered, but her voice betrayed the relish she felt at the idea of a sensational murder practically on her doorstep. "All the same," she added as she led him into a small room, where the furniture had faded to a nondescript gray and the carpet was threadbare, "I know a gentleman when I see one. Make yourself comfortable while I bring in the tea things," she said, self-consciously wiping hands on her starched apron.

Mrs. Cranshaw was a stout woman in her late fifties, with brown hair streaked with gray and rosy cheeks. Her shrewd, dark brown eyes reminded Reginald of currants, perhaps because the house was warm and smelled strongly of vanilla and butter. His suspicions were confirmed when she returned with a tray on which rested a plate of shortbread, a pot of tea, two cups, sugar, and cream.

"You're American, are you?" she asked as she laid the tray down on a scarred mahogany table that groaned under the weight of the tea things.

"Yes, I am."

"I thought as much," Mrs. Cranshaw said, nodding. "I can always tell. I had a nephew who went to America. He lives in Chicago. I don't suppose you'd know him. His name is Robert Gibbs."

"No," Reginald said, "I'm afraid not."

"I had no idea Mr. Philips had American relatives," she said curiously as she poured out the tea. Reginald didn't reply. "But then I didn't know Mr. Philips very well. He kept to himself, he did. Henry and I tried on several occasions to be friendly, but he didn't care to associate with us," she said cheerfully. "I'm sure it wasn't personal. He didn't have any friends that we knew of, and we've been here longer than him. It will be twenty-five years ago this July we bought this house. You'd be amazed if you had seen the neighborhood then," she said, her cup poised halfway to her lips, her eyes beginning to glaze over. "It wasn't anything like it is now."

"Mrs. Cranshaw," Reginald broke in quickly, "I understand from the police that you told them you saw a woman entering my uncle's house the night he was murdered."

"That's right," she agreed. "Have one of my shortbreads.

My mother was from Aberdeen and she taught me how to make them like they do there."

"What did this woman look like?" Reginald asked as he accepted a shortbread. "Can you remember?"

"I always had an excellent memory," Mrs. Cranshaw said proudly as she sipped her tea. "It was about eight o'clock. I was just putting the garbage out when I noticed this beautifully dressed woman get out of a cab, walk up the steps to Mr. Philips's house, and ring the bell. She was tall and slim and wearing a real silk dress and one of those fancy velvet capes. The hood was covering one side of her face, but I could still see that she was, as Henry would say, a real smasher. I thought she had made a mistake and come to the wrong place. It was odd seeing a woman like that in this neighborhood, let alone going to see him. Your uncle, Mr. Keyes, no disrespect intended, wasn't very social, and while he entertained a half dozen men in his time, we never saw him admit a woman into his house in all the time we've lived here. I was just about to ask her what address she wanted, thinking she was lost, when Mr. Philips came to the door. After she spoke to him for a few minutes, he let her in. I was shocked. When I told Henry, he came running to see, but by that time she was inside with the door closed. He thought I was pulling his leg, but I saw her all right."

"If her hood was up, then you couldn't have had a very clear picture of her," Reginald said, unable to hide his disappointment. "After all, it was evening."

Mrs. Cranshaw bridled. "When she turned her head for an instant, the lamplight showed on the part of her face that wasn't in shadow, and I noticed right off she wasn't one of those phony blondes. She was very fair, like a Scandinavian." She hesitated. "But there was something funny about her face."

Reginald frowned. "What do you mean, funny?"

"Well, you're going to think this is strange, but she looked a bit Chinese."

"The shadows must have been playing tricks on you. You don't often see a blonde Chinese," Reginald said dryly.

"Those high cheekbones and slanty eyes put me in mind of a Chinese," she insisted with a sniff.

"What sort of impression did you form of her?" Reginald

asked, hoping to mollify her. "What kind of woman would you say she was?"

"She didn't belong here, that's for sure," Mrs. Cranshaw said firmly.

"Did she seem to be a wife, a mother, an innocent young girl, a woman of the streets?" Reginald persisted.

Mrs. Cranshaw considered. "She didn't strike me as anybody's mother or wife, and I wouldn't say she was an innocent young girl either. But then again, I wouldn't say she was a streetwalker." She paused. "She was sophisticated and she dressed expensively and with good taste. She could have been one of those Parisian models," she said.

"You didn't see her leave?" Reginald asked, even though he already knew the answer.

"No," Mrs. Cranshaw said regretfully. "I couldn't say how long she stayed or when she left."

"Would you recognize her again if you saw her?"

"She had an unusual face, that's for sure. I'd know her if I saw her. Do . . . do the police think *she* killed him?" Mrs. Cranshaw asked curiously.

"No," Reginald said abruptly, thinking of Leyland Carter.

"Oh!" Mrs. Cranshaw was clearly disappointed.

"My uncle had several business contacts, but he wasn't very methodical about keeping their names and addresses. I was wondering if the woman you saw was one of them," Reginald explained vaguely. "I have to settle his affairs."

"We didn't know your uncle very well, Henry and I, but you have our sympathy," Mrs. Cranshaw said. "I always think death is hardest on those that are still living."

"I didn't know my uncle very well either," Reginald said. Then he added, "I've greatly enjoyed the tea, Mrs. Cranshaw. Your shortbread was wonderful. I don't remember when I've had better."

She beamed.

"I don't want to hold you up from your work, and I've got to be getting along myself," he said, standing up.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be more helpful." Mrs. Cranshaw put her teacup down and led him to the front door.

"You've been extremely informative," Reginald assured her.

"If you want to know anything more, just drop by any

time," she urged. Reginald promised that he would stop by again if he needed any more information and left.

Armed with the description Mrs. Cranshaw had provided of the mysterious woman who had visited Philips on the night he was murdered, Reginald debated over the approach he would take in getting to meet and talking with Ellen Mansfield. He didn't feel very hopeful about the outcome. Whatever she looked like, he doubted if Mrs. Mansfield was a blonde Chinese. Hailing a cab, he decided to wait until after lunch before progressing any further and gave the address of the Café-Royal.

It was too early for the usual lunch crowd. The only other customers were a romantic couple in the back, who were gazing rapturously into each other's eyes, two middle-aged women, who, judging by the pile of maps and other paraphernalia, were tourists, and a lone woman at a window seat. As he passed her table, she glanced up, and to his surprise a spark of recognition flashed in her amber eyes. She blushed and quickly looked away.

Once seated, Reginald casually picked up the menu and, under the pretense of studying it, scrutinized her, wondering who she was. Suddenly he remembered the attractive young woman he had bumped into in the hotel the other evening on his way to meet Mason and the ambassador. He was flattered that she had recognized him. Today she had on a green and white print dress that was very becoming. He noticed that her table was set for two. The waiter appeared at her side and whispered something. What he said disconcerted her. Frowning, she sat back and reluctantly nodded, giving him her order. Deftly he removed the second setting and departed for the kitchen. Reginald understood. Her luncheon partner was not going to show up. If she had smiled at him, he would have sent the waiter to her table with an invitation to join him. Unfortunately, she had studiously avoided glancing in his direction since first recognizing him and was now in the process of staring moodily at her place setting.

Amanda told herself she should have known better than to trust Sally. More often than not, as far as appointments were concerned, Sally was totally unreliable. She had never been on time in her life, and it was not unheard of for her to forget about an appointment altogether. This time, at least, Sally had

remembered at the last moment and telephoned the management, insisting Amanda dine without her and the bill he added to her tab. What would she have done if Sally had not remembered, Amanda wondered. With a shudder she realized she couldn't have afforded the wine she was now drinking. Sipping the expensive Bordeaux, Amanda knew that she should relax and enjoy the meal, but guilt plagued her. She sighed, thinking she should have returned home, but it was good to get away for a while.

Michael still hadn't acquired another position, nor was he exerting himself very hard on his own behalf, she thought resentfully. Like everyone else these days, he was discussing the very real possibility of war. Ever since Russia had started mobilizing troops on the eastern front, people were muttering that any day now Germany, as an ally of Austria, would declare war on Russia. France was already restive. Michael felt that Britain would be unable to keep out of a war in Europe and had announced last evening after supper that he was personally looking forward to it. He had every intention he said, of joining up. For the first time in many months he was enthusiastic. He informed them he had been talking with several old friends who were pilots, and it was their feeling that in a war, airplanes would prove an invaluable asset. Michael knew how to fly and intended to volunteer his services as a pilot should it become necessary. He had begun practicing at one of the fields outside London. While it was a relief to see him in a more positive frame of mind, it was depressing to think that if he did go to war she would be left alone with her mother-in-law. Nor was it a great comfort to know that Michael was going off to a war from which he might never return or from which he might come back maimed or crippled. Men, Amanda thought with annoyance, were very unreasonable, unthinking, selfish, and irresponsible creatures.

She glared out the window as the main course arrived and noticed that it had started to rain. It was vexing that today of all days, when she had wanted to unburden herself to Sally, she should be stood up. She had hoped that Sally's sophisticated knowledge might prove more enlightening than what the doctors had told her about getting pregnant. With Michael preparing to desert her for the greater glory of God and country, she was even more eager to bear a child. While he was away, she would have someone to love. Amanda hoped that

Michael's change in mood would make him more amorous than he had been in the last few weeks.

She glanced at the couple in the back, who still hadn't touched their food, and felt suddenly dowdy and unattractive until she looked at the handsome gentleman at the table nearby, who earlier had seemed to admire her. Amanda saw that he was busily engaged with his meal and studied him more openly. She decided she liked him. He had a strong, interesting face, with intelligent blue eyes. There was an air about him of the easy assurance that comes with power. He struck her as a man who enjoyed life and who always got what he wanted. As she sized him up, some very improper thoughts entered her head. What would he be like in bed? Would he be different from Michael? Would Sally have thought him an experienced lover? To her horror, he suddenly looked directly into her eyes and smiled. She turned beet red and stared down at the food on her plate, mortified. Not daring to look his way again, Amanda looked down at the table, even after the waiter cleared away her main course and brought on the coffee and desert. When the waiter paused and cleared his throat in a meaningful manner, she forced herself to look up.

"Yes, what is it?"

"The gentleman at table four wishes to know if you would honor him by allowing him to join you for dessert, madam," the waiter said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Amanda felt her throat constrict and her heart began to beat so wildly that she found it difficult to breathe. She knew perfectly well that she ought to refuse such a request, but a peculiar quirk in her nature took that moment to assert itself.

"Thank you. I . . . I would like that very much," she replied faintly, thinking at the same time that she must be mad. She had never in her life done such a thing.

"My name is Reginald Keyes," the distinguished gentleman said politely as he joined her a moment later.

"My name is Amanda, Amanda Powell," she replied with a flush.

"I believe I was the brute who knocked the package out of your arms the other evening at the Ritz," Reginald said, smiling into her eyes and causing her heart to miss a beat. "Allow me to express profound apologies for my clumsiness."

"It wasn't entirely your fault," Amanda said nervously. "I . . . I wasn't looking where I was going."

"Do you eat here often?" Reginald asked, thinking she was far too awkward and uneasy to be a practiced flirt. The idea that she had been as attracted to him as he was to her and had allowed him to join her despite her own natural misgivings was a very pleasant thought.

"I used to come here quite often," Amanda admitted with a sinking heart.

"I always think," Reginald said, "that meeting people in a strange country is a particularly difficult affair. The social conventions are so rigid. I doubt very much if I could have met you under normal circumstances. I don't know many British people and none, I'm sure, who also know you and would have introduced us. So I have to thank you for taking pity on me and throwing social conventions out the window."

Amanda smiled and asked tentatively, "Are you a Canadian?"

"American. My home is in New York City. I'm married, with two children, one of whom has somehow or other managed to become an adult overnight," he said in a jocular voice, calculated to put to rest some of Amanda's fears.

The fact that he was married eased Amanda's mind. He was an attractive middle-aged man who was lonely and wished to have an enjoyable chat. Amanda had often heard that Americans were notoriously friendly, and Mr. Keyes seemed to be proof of that. He looked harmless enough and quite kind. This comfortable picture went a good way to restoring her confidence in dealing with an unusual situation. At the same time, it made her feel that it was quite respectable to be talking to him in a public restaurant surrounded by other people. If he stepped out of line, she felt she was capable of putting him in his place. The idea of spending an hour in the company of an interesting, handsome stranger was beginning to have great appeal.

To their mutual delight, Amanda and Reginald soon discovered they shared an interest in Mozart, musical comedies, mysteries, and travel. They had visited many of the same places in Europe and shared similar viewpoints on art, books, and the ballet. Amanda thought he had a great sense of humor and an unerring eye for the ridiculous. As a storyteller he was vastly entertaining, and she quickly found her reservations melting under the warmth of his smile and the laughter they shared. Reginald found her charming and unpretentious, and

once her natural reticence had been overcome, totally unself-conscious. Two hours passed far too quickly for both of them.

It was Amanda who finally said with a sigh, "I had no idea it was so late. I think I'd better be going."

As they waited for the check to arrive, Reginald's attention was suddenly arrested by the arrival of Mason and a fair companion he was sure was Ellen Mansfield.

Amanda looked curiously in their direction. "Do you know them?"

"I know the man," Reginald said, and nodded as they passed by. Mason looked uncomfortable and hesitated as though he were debating whether to stop at their table, but then changed his mind and continued on. "Tell me," Reginald said slowly, "would you describe that woman as a Scandinavian with Oriental features?"

Amanda studied the woman with interest. She noted that she was very pretty, with the delicate beauty of a fair blonde that fades early. In ten years people would say of her that she had been lovely once, but there would be no lines of character or distinction to compensate for lost beauty. "What an odd question," Amanda said, amused. "In my opinion her face is attractive in a gentle, soft way, but hardly the exotic creature you describe."

"Someone described a woman that way to me recently," Reginald said with a smile. "I thought they were referring to the woman you see there. Obviously I was mistaken." He frowned. "And yet," he said, staring at Mrs. Mansfield, "I can't help but feel now that I see her that although the description doesn't fit her, it does ring a bell somewhere, bizarre as it may sound."

"A Scandinavian Oriental!" The woman looks every inch English to me, and her fair hair owes nothing to nature," Amanda replied.

"Perhaps you're right," Reginald mused as he escorted her outside. They walked in silence the length of the block, a fine mist dampening their faces. Suddenly, he took her hand. "I hope you will agree to meet me again tomorrow afternoon for lunch at the Café-Royal. Please don't say no," he begged. "I don't know when I've spent a more delightful afternoon."

Amanda gently withdrew her hand. "I feel the same way," she admitted, "but . . ." She was on the verge of telling him she didn't think it was wise of them to see each other again

when the words froze in her throat. They were standing near the curb at the corner of the street. Seemingly out of nowhere, a shiny black Willoughby Cole sedan sped straight at them. There were two men inside, one of whom was leaning out of the passenger side aiming a gun. Amanda screamed. Reginald turned and, grabbing her, shoved her into the safety of a doorway. Crouching low, he shielded her with his arms just as a rain of bullets embedded themselves in the woodwork above their heads. The car raced by.

"They deliberately tried to . . . to kill us," Amanda stammered as they stood up. "Why? Why would they do that?"

Reginald pressed her close. "It has nothing to do with you. I'm the one they wanted to kill."

Pulling away, Amanda stared at him. She was still trembling. "I don't understand. Why would they want to kill you? Who are they?"

"I'm terribly sorry for involving you like this. If I had known there was any danger, I would never have introduced myself." He hesitated, wondering how much he should reveal. "I can't be sure, but I suspect the men who shot at us were foreign agents. At the moment I'm trying to clear up a rather sordid affair for the State Department. Obviously, they would prefer I leave it alone."

Amanda's eyes widened. "Are you a . . . a spy?"

"Nothing so sensational, I'm afraid," he said, smiling, hoping she wouldn't press him. "Unfortunately, spies aren't the only ones who run into danger in these uncertain times. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Just a little shaken, that's all," she assured him. On the whole, she was inclined to believe he was a spy working for the American government or perhaps some other government. She didn't believe ordinary citizens got shot at by foreign agents in speeding cars. The idea didn't alarm her. On the contrary, now that the danger was past, she felt oddly excited. It wasn't every day that an attractive, intriguing man like Reginald Keyes picked her up in a restaurant and turned out to be a spy. Nor was she in the custom of being shot at.

"I'll get a cab," Reginald said and hesitated. "Unless you feel we ought to report the incident to a policeman."

It was clear this was not what he wanted to do, and Amanda was sure he had his reasons. She had reasons for not reporting it herself. Michael and Eugenia might put a different inter-

pretation on her being in the company of a strange man. "I doubt if they could do anything about it now, and I'm late as it is."

"Thank you," he said warmly. When he returned with a cab and helped her into it he added, "I'll be at the Café-Royal tomorrow at eleven. I hope, in spite of what happened, you'll come." He closed the door and stepped back. The driver took off before Amanda had a chance to reply.

As he watched the cab disappear around a corner, Reginald's mind was only partially occupied with whether Amanda would meet him again. Someone had tried to murder him, and if he was to save himself, he had to find out who.

Continuing down the street, he was lost in thought as a newsboy rushed past, shouting excitedly, "Read all about it! Germany declares war on Russia!"

Reginald purchased a copy. Hailing a cab, he was just about to enter it and read the latest news when a familiar voice addressed him.

"May I join you?" Vladimir asked.

"Certainly," Reginald said. "Where to?"

"The Savoy."

Reginald gave the driver the destination, and the two men made themselves comfortable.

"I see you have heard the news," Vladimir said after a slight pause.

"It seems you were right after all."

"In this case, being right affords me little pleasure," Vladimir replied gloomily. "I have been ordered to pack my things and return to St. Petersburg immediately. I have a confession to make," he added heavily. "War has never appealed to me. I prefer battles of the mind to battles fought in trenches."

"There is talk that Britain may yet convince France to stay out of it, in which case it will be a contained war," Reginald remarked. "Although such news can hardly matter to you, at least the prospect of a global war may yet be avoided."

"You Americans are such optimists," Vladimir said dryly. "Tell me, what brings you to London? I thought you intended to remain resting by the fireside of your lovely home in New York."

"That was my plan," Reginald agreed, "but unexpected business drew me back here."

"Ah yes," Vladimir murmured, "the Philips affair. I heard of it, naturally," he said, amused at Reginald's look of surprise, "and of the tragic suicide last night of the ambassador's secretary. You work very fast, my friend. It chills me to the bone to think that one day we may be adversaries."

Reginald laughed shortly. "I had nothing to do with the boy's suicide."

"There are those who believe your friend Mr. Hammond had a hand in it." His dark eyes lit up with laughter. "Naturally, I am not one of them. And, of course, the ambassador is above reproach."

"Tricky situation," Reginald grumbled.

"As you say." The cab pulled in front of the Savoy and Vladimir got out. "Perhaps we will meet again soon," he said, shaking Reginald's hand, "but I hope it will not be on the field of battle. Even if we end up fighting on the same side, I would hate to watch you die."

Reginald's grip tightened and Vladimir stared at him quizzically.

"What would you think if I told you a witness had seen a woman visiting Philips on the night he was murdered and described her as very fair, like a Scandinavian, but with Chinese features?"

Vladimir laughed. "I should say your witness was not very reliable or . . ." he paused and a strange gleam came into his dark eyes, "perhaps I should think of Ilsa."

"Ilsa?" Reginald repeated softly. "Who is she?"

Gently closing the door Vladimir leaned closer to the window. "She is very young, very beautiful, and very deadly. Count Rees-Shulberg trained her. She is one of his mistresses." He stepped back. "Au revoir, Reginald, and be careful. The count's dislike of you is very personal."

Reginald sat back, thinking over what Vladimir had told him. Count Rees-Shulberg had never forgiven him for an affair early in his career when Reginald had forged some papers and made him look like a fool before his superiors. The count had been made a laughingstock in his own country and the memory of that humiliation by an upstart American had festered over the years. Once, when they were both in a hunting party in the Black Forest, Reginald had nearly been killed. The count had apologized. It was an accident. He had seen what looked like a stag moving about in the bushes, but

Reginald knew the bullet that had grazed his shoulder had been meant to kill him. Only the fortuitous arrival of two other members of the party had prevented the firing of a second shot.

The idea that Count Rees-Shulberg and his mistress were involved in the Philips case didn't surprise him, but it still didn't answer the major question of who was leaking information. He didn't think it likely that Mason was involved with two blonde mistresses. Picturing the ambassador in the role of a scheming traitor or duped lover also didn't ring true.

As the cab stopped in front of the Ritz, Reginald decided that his first move was to locate Ilsa. He couldn't rid himself of the nagging thought that he had actually seen her himself. One thing was certain. Someone had tried to kill him only a short time ago. Why? They had the plans. If Mason and the ambassador were innocent, who else had a motive?

Chapter Six

AMANDA'S RESOLUTION NOT to see Reginald only lasted until after breakfast the following morning. Eugenia's constant criticism and Michael's continued neglect drove her out of the house. Even then, she wavered. In the end, she decided to go through with it, although her conscience warned her she was playing with fire. Reginald was an exceedingly attractive man, and now that she suspected he was a spy, she ought to stay away from him. But she was quite unable to do so. Her deepest sexual yearnings had been reawakened. And the threat of danger only made the meeting that much more of an adventure. Sally wasn't the only one who could be a rebel, she thought defiantly.

The afternoon at the Café-Royal succeeded in putting to rest whatever doubts may have lingered. Her good spirits restored, Amanda returned to Hackett Lane with a degree of equanimity she ordinarily would not have possessed, enthusiastically promising to meet Reginald again. The next day they decided to take advantage of the fine weather and strolled through Regent's Park, taking particular delight in visiting the zoo. When it came time to part, Amanda was reluctant to do so, and only managed to say goodbye after they had made a date for the following afternoon.

Reginald suggested they visit the Wallace Collection. In 1897 Lady Wallace had bequeathed to the nation an outstanding collection of art works of all kinds, which neither of them had yet had the privilege of viewing. These works included

those of Rubens, Titian, Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Velazquez, Gainsborough, and eighteenth-century artists such as Boucher and Fragonard. European and Oriental arms and armor were on display along with sculpture, furniture, and goldsmiths' work.

The day was typically English. Although it was August, there was a chill in the air. The weather alternated between a light drizzle and a heavy downpour. When they emerged from the Wallace Collection, it was four o'clock but looked considerably later. The sky had turned a lead gray and patches of fog swirled about the streets. They had spent an hour viewing the collection and had done so in a subdued mood, exchanging little conversation.

"Would you like to have tea before you leave?" Reginald asked.

"I would prefer to try a new place," Amanda replied hesitantly.

Reginald took her to the Ritz, where a restaurant had been built in the lobby. They walked through a gallery of marble arches with gold leaf trim. Smiling cupids beamed down on them as they continued through a dense forest of potted palms, emerging into an oval-shaped room with a gold fountain in the middle and a gingerbread ceiling.

Seeds of love long denied had fallen on fertile soil. The joy and excitement each experienced in the other's company, combined with a shared intimacy they didn't feel with their respective spouses, was beginning to strip away any illusions they may have had about a simple friendship. The sexual attraction that had always been there suddenly exploded, making conversation awkward.

To Reginald, who had never known love, finding it almost overnight, and with a married woman, made him doubt the reality of the experience. The dreadful suspicion that he was in love with a stranger would, he felt, disappear once his desire for her had been satiated. He glanced at her and caught his breath. God, she was beautiful.

Amanda's eyes shone and her face glowed from an inner radiance. Powerful new feelings were stirring in her loins. She had never before felt this way about a man. It couldn't be love, she told herself firmly. The idea was ridiculous. She had only known him for three days. As she moved her legs under

the table, they brushed Reginald's. A shock of pleasure ran through her body and she blushed. Her face was burning hot, but her hands were cold and clammy. She thought of Michael and how she ought to be home but couldn't bring herself to leave. Taking her hand, Reginald kissed it and continued to hold it in his. Amanda knew she should protest and withdraw her hand but could not.

"Let's go to my suite," Reginald said huskily.

Amanda nodded. As if in a dream, she accompanied him upstairs. I must be mad, she thought. Briefly she wondered how the elegant strangers they passed in the corridor would react if they knew what was in her mind. Did they assume they were married? Would they be shocked, amused? Would they care? She closed her eyes as Reginald fitted the key in the lock and, out of desperation, tried to summon up Michael's face before her, hoping to break the bewitching spell. To her horror, her husband's handsome face remained a blur. Suddenly they were inside the suite with the door closed. It was very still.

Seeing the look of panic in her eyes, Reginald said gently, "If you want to go . . ."

"No," Amanda whispered thickly, shocked at her reply. Why am I doing this, she thought wildly, even as she trembled and groaned with pleasure as he drew her close and kissed her. She could feel him hard against her through their clothing and knew he was excited, but he took his time. Slowly undressing her, Reginald kissed the crook of her neck, the corner of her mouth, her breasts. She moaned with delight. Her body felt like it was on fire and her mouth was dry. Her legs felt weak and unsteady as the rest of her clothing was removed by expert hands. Finally she stood before him naked.

"You're beautiful," Reginald said, his voice hoarse with passion. He swung her up into his arms, and she put her hands around his neck and laid her head on his chest, clinging to him as a child. He carried her to the bedroom and tenderly placed her on the large, ornately carved bed, while he removed his own clothing. Amanda watched between half-closed lids, fascinated. She had never before seen a man naked in the light of day. Michael always undressed in the bathroom and they made love in total darkness, or with most of their clothing still on. She gasped as he stripped off the last garment. His body was firm and muscular. Fine blond hairs covered his broad

chest and formed a perfect V just above his navel, revealing a long, thick phallus stiff with desire. As he joined her on the bed, she put out a trembling hand and tentatively touched it. Her excitement grew. She gently rubbed her erect nipples against his hairy chest, smelling his musky masculine odor mingled with faint traces of an aftershave. He grabbed her loose flowing hair and wrapped it once around his hand, kissing her hard on the mouth. With his other hand, he ran down the inside of her thighs, touching her where she was wet. She writhed in agony, pulling him on top of her, wanting his hard maleness inside.

"Amanda," he murmured as he entered her, moving slowly at first, causing her to rake her nails across his back in sheer ecstasy. The waves of pleasure became deeper, more powerful, until she gasped out, "Don't stop. My God, don't stop."

"Darling," Reginald muttered as his movements quickened and the thrusts became longer and more penetrating. He felt her breathing accelerate. She whimpered and grabbed at him. He knew she was near and that he too was very close but resisted letting go until he heard her cry out in the first throes of pleasure. Only then did he allow himself to surrender to the flood of passion that claimed them both.

When it was over, they lay back exhausted, entwined in each other's embrace. The silence between them was filled with unspoken thoughts and unfamiliar feelings. The ticking of the ormolu clock on the mantel above the marble fireplace intruded on their intimacy and reminded them of the lateness of the hour. Long overdue at home, Amanda had no idea what excuse she would offer for her absence, while Reginald was eager to visit a certain house in Belgravia.

For Reginald, the tenderness, the satisfaction he had felt had both surprised and shaken him. He had not expected to feel so intensely, while his hunger for her lingered on. For Amanda, the guilt could never outweigh the beautiful thing that had happened between them. Sally had been right, she thought with amazement as Reginald's hand briefly rested on her thigh, and she shivered. The ring of Mercury winked up at her as if they shared a secret. She smiled. For the first time she knew what it felt like to be fulfilled and at peace as a woman. Reginald's strength and the sense of his own masculinity struck a deep chord of longing in her. With him she felt soft,

vulnerable, desirable, and fragile, feelings she hadn't allowed herself to experience in a long time.

The sound of the rain pounding at the windows had an urgency about it that finally caused her to relinquish her day-dreaming with a sigh of regret. Gently she removed herself from Reginald's embrace. He kissed her but did not try to stop her when she went into the outer room to dress. By the time she had finished, he had emerged, also fully clothed.

"I'll put you into a cab," he said softly, touching her hair.

Amanda nodded but couldn't speak. She wondered if Reginald felt the way she did and then instantly told herself she was a fool. He probably thought of her as nothing more than a pleasant interlude. Silently they walked through the brilliantly lit lobby so wrapped up in themselves that they failed to notice groups of people standing about conversing in hushed whispers.

"I have to see you again," Reginald said as they paused in the doorway, his arm pressing on hers. "I'll be busy for a day or so, but I thought we could have lunch on Friday at the Café-Royal," he added hopefully.

"Yes," Amanda replied with a feeling of elation, realizing that he cared as much for her as she did for him. She had misjudged him after all, she thought with relief.

The doorman signaled to a cab and as Amanda stepped into it, the driver asked gloomily, "Have you folks heard?"

"Heard what?" Reginald queried.

"We're at war with the Germans," he said, "as of an hour ago."

Reginald and Amanda exchanged concerned glances but no news, no matter how grim, could entirely dim their newfound happiness.

"Friday at one," Reginald reminded her as the door shut.

Amanda settled back into the shadows. It was only after the cab was well out of sight that she gave the driver her address. Reginald admitted he had no plans to stay in London longer than a month. The affair would be over once he returned to New York and life would settle back down to what it had once been. She had no intention of leaving Michael, nor did she want him to find out about this brief, mad episode in her life. In the meantime, she intended to see as much of Reginald as time and discretion would allow. She owed it to herself. If

Reginald had been merely handsome with a good physique, she would have had little difficulty in repulsing him, but against the advances of his mind and soul she had no defense.

The awning of the Ritz was thrashed so brutally by the pounding rain and wind that it seemed in real danger of ripping apart and collapsing on the heads of those underneath. Reginald sighed as he watched Amanda's cab turn the corner. The rain bounced off his polished shoes and dripped down the collar of his jacket.

"Can I get a cab for you sir?" the doorman inquired.

"Yes, thank you," Reginald replied.

As he settled back in the cab, his thoughts centered not on Amanda, but on the address he had given in Belgravia. He had discovered that an Ilsa von Shiller had arrived in London two months ago from Berlin and had stayed at the Savoy for a week. After that she had apparently vanished without a trace. There was no indication she had returned to Berlin, but he was certain she wouldn't linger now that war had been declared between Germany and Great Britain. It was while he was trying to trace her that the feeling he had seen her before returned, and with it an idea he felt worthy of exploring. He had promptly sent a note to Mason to join him at his earliest convenience. Now that Germany had forced England into declaring war by invading neutral Belgium, he knew it was impossible to delay the investigation another moment and felt pangs of guilt for allowing his personal life to take temporary precedence over his work. If Ilsa left England, he would never know the truth.

The cab pulled up in front of a comfortable house near Brompton Road. Next to most of the large townhouses that occupied the area, number 10 was modest, even small by comparison. There were lights on throughout the house. Reginald paid the driver, dashed up the steps two at a time, and rang the bell. There was a rustling sound inside and then the door was opened abruptly.

"Hello, Willard," Reginald said pleasantly. "May I come in for a moment?"

"Yes, yes of course," Willard stammered, taken off guard at Reginald's unexpected visit.

Willard, wearing a brown silk brocade smoking jacket and slippers, reluctantly led him past an immaculate hallway,

where two suitcases were standing, into the sitting room on the left. It was a small but comfortable room with leather furniture and an Oriental carpet. Although there was a bottle of whiskey on the desk, he didn't offer any to Reginald. There was a dying fire on the hearth, and he went over to it and stirred the coals. Finally he turned and in a voice that was bristling with annoyance asked, "What is it?"

"I should think," Reginald said dryly, "with your diplomatic suavity, 'you would have automatically offered me a drink on a night like this.'"

Willard obediently poured out a whiskey and soda. "I hope you won't think me rude, but frankly, Reg, I wasn't expecting anyone, certainly not you. Why are you here?" he demanded impatiently. The sound of a door softly closing upstairs made him frown.

"I couldn't help but notice the suitcases in the hall," Reginald said lightly, sipping his drink. "Were you intending to go abroad?"

"No," Willard snapped. "Not that it's any business of yours."

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," Reginald said apologetically, indicating the upstairs rooms with a smile.

"It doesn't matter," Willard said, moving to the table to fix himself a drink. "You're here and you might as well say what's on your mind. I'm sure you didn't come around here at this hour to exchange aimless bantering. Is it another assignment?" he asked curiously. "Is that it?"

"No, actually, it's an old assignment," Reginald said slowly, watching him and keeping his ears alert for any more noises. "The murder of Philips, to be more precise."

"I thought that was settled," Willard said. "His secretary's suicide proved that."

"On the contrary. His suicide proved just the opposite."

"I realize," Willard said sarcastically, "that you were brought over here by Mason to look into the matter because he distrusted my abilities, but your presence is no longer required. It was a simple, straightforward case that is now no longer active. Even Mason would agree with me. My taking the wind out of your sails was a disappointment, of course, but I would have credited you with more sense than to persist in stubbornly refusing to face facts. You're no longer needed,

Reginald, and if the Philips business is the only reason you came . . .”

“It is my contention,” Reginald interrupted, making himself comfortable in one of the chairs, much to Willard’s irritation, “that the secretary was made to look guilty.”

Willard glared at him. “If that were so, the ambassador and your friend Mason would be the only other suspects.” An interested light came into his eyes. “I did at one time suspect Mason.”

“What about the mysterious woman who visited Philips on the night he was murdered?”

Willard came over and sat down on one of the chairs. “Naturally I connected her with Mrs. Mansfield, but I couldn’t shake her and Mason’s alibi. And there was so much damning evidence against the secretary that I was forced to abandon that particular idea.” He sounded truly regretful.

“I wasn’t referring to Mrs. Mansfield. What about the other woman?” Reginald’s voice had taken on a hard edge.

“I don’t recall any other woman.” Willard seemed genuinely puzzled.

“What impression did you receive of Philips’s lady friend?”

Willard stared. “Merely that she was blonde and attractive. Why?”

“She wasn’t referred to as having Oriental features?” Reginald asked sharply.

“That’s simply ridiculous, old man,” Willard complained. “Surely you see that. I mean, what white woman looks Chinese? Pure drivel.”

“Is it?”

“Of course it is. That woman who lived next to Philips was simply making it up so that the story would be more interesting. Sheer fantasy. Take my word for it.”

“But why make up something so peculiar? She must have known she wouldn’t be believed.”

“Who knows what that type of woman thinks,” Willard snapped. “For that matter, I’d like to know what’s on your mind to come barging into my house raving about some imaginary woman.”

“She’s not imaginary,” Reginald said softly. “I’ve seen her myself.”

Hearing a stealthy movement outside the room, he got up and moved over to the fireplace, where he picked up a poker and stirred the coals.

"You've seen her?" Willard asked, stunned.

"She's German but undoubtedly has Slavic origins, hence the slightly Oriental cast to her features. She's very beautiful and quite an accomplished spy."

"Good Lord. If what you're saying is true . . ."

"It is," Reginald assured him grimly.

"But then there must be an accomplice."

"There is indeed. He too is a spy, although not a very accomplished one, I'm afraid. He has two uncles who are generals. It isn't inconceivable that they should let slip the information about Philips and his invention to their nephew."

"This is outrageous," Willard exclaimed, turning red with indignation. Jumping up, he laid his drink on the desk, spilling some of it in the process. "You're out of your mind. I must insist that you leave this house at once."

Determined to press the issue further, Reginald remained where he was. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but within the past two months you have acquired a mistress. She's tall, fair, and very beautiful. Her name, unless she's changed it, is Ilsa von Shiller. Ilsa is an agent for Berlin who was instructed to come here with the express intention of luring you into an intimate alliance so that her people could discover the nature of Philips's secret weapon."

Instead of protesting, as Reginald thought he might, Willard stared at him, speechless and drained of color.

"It was through her association with you," Reginald continued, directing the poker at Willard to emphasize his words, "that Philips was murdered and the plans stolen. And it is my guess that she stayed on afterward in order to continue to forward American and British intelligence operations to Berlin. Now that war has been declared between Great Britain and Germany, it has become too dangerous to remain here any longer. That is undoubtedly the reason for the suitcases in the hall."

"Ilsa!" Willard stammered. "But . . . but that's impossible. You must be mistaken."

"No, he is not mistaken," Ilsa said coolly as she entered the room. She was wearing a dark green suit with a white silk scarf

loosely draped around her long neck. Her blonde hair was softly piled on top of her head in waves, in sharp contrast to the cold glitter of her green eyes. In her delicate hand she held a small pearl-handled pistol, which she was pointing at the flabbergasted Willard. "Mr. Keyes is quite correct in his estimation of the situation, even to my origins," she said amused. Her voice was light and pleasant with a slight accent. "My mother was Polish, but my father was Prussian. I was raised in Bavaria."

"We met by accident," Willard sputtered.

Ilsa smiled. "It was made to look that way, of course."

"What do you intend to do with us?" Reginald asked softly, tightening his hold on the poker.

"If we allowed you to live we would be fools," Count Rees-Shulberg said in a harsh, guttural voice as he joined Ilsa in the doorway. He too held a weapon in his hand, a shiny black revolver, which he was aiming at Reginald. "You would soon bring the authorities down on us. We would be tried as spies and shot."

"Who are you?" Willard shouted. "What are you doing here?"

The count executed a mocking little bow, clicking his heels together. "Count Rees-Shulberg."

Willard gaped at him, horrified.

"If you shoot us, you'll alarm the neighbors and impede your escape," Reginald said, stalling for time.

"The greater risk is leaving you alive, and in any case, sparing your life would rob me of one of the greatest pleasures left in this world," the count said maliciously as he pulled the trigger.

Prepared for this moment, Reginald threw the poker at him with all the force he could muster while dropping to the floor behind one of the chairs. The poker struck the count in the arm and his shot misfired. The bullet grazed Reginald's shoulder. At the same moment, Ilsa fired two shots at Willard, who groaned and fell to the floor. The count cursed and rushed over to Reginald to make sure he was dead. Pretending to be unconscious until his enemy moved closer, Reginald grabbed him by the ankles and wrestled him to the floor. The next few shots went wild as the two men struggled with the gun. Ilsa took aim and shot Reginald in the back as he was trying to

overpower the count. Reginald felt a burning sensation in his right side before the ground swirled up to meet him and he sank into oblivion. The last conscious memory he had was of the count arguing with Ilsa in German.

"I want to make sure this swine will give us no more trouble." He viciously kicked Reginald in the ribs.

"The shots will bring the police," Ilsa said anxiously. "Forget about him, Frederick. He has been shot twice. If he isn't dead now, he will be soon. We must escape from England tonight. I know a back way, but we must hurry."

The count was out of ammunition. He snatched Ilsa's pistol only to discover it was jammed and threw it down in disgust. He could hear a great commotion at the front door, as though several people were trying to break in. He grunted, "Very well. I'll be with you in a moment." Pushing aside the grate, he emptied the smoldering logs onto the rug, and snatching some papers from the desk, tossed them on top.

"Hurry," Ilsa urged. "They will be inside in a moment."

"I'm coming," he muttered from the doorway as the flames caught on the rug and it began to burn. The thin dueling scar that ran alongside his right cheek, which he had received as a young boy, turned an angry red as he sneered, "Your luck has run out, and it is now I who have the last laugh."

By the time Mason managed to break into the house, with the police and half the neighborhood close behind him, the count and Ilsa were gone and the hall was full of smoke. They found Willard and Reginald lying in pools of blood on the floor of the sitting room, flames shooting up all around them. Some of the flames had already singed Reginald's hair, and the cuff of his pant leg was burning.

Two days later, Reginald, who had miraculously survived with only minor injuries despite a considerable loss of blood, was having lunch with Mason in the restaurant of his hotel. It was a bright, sunny day. The light that streamed through the windows showed up the lines of pain and weariness on his face.

"Are you sure," Mason asked with some concern as he took in his friend's pale complexion, "it was wise of you to meet me here? We could have had a tray sent up to your suite. No need to force yourself to get out of bed before you're ready."

"I refuse to be confined to bed for any longer than absolutely necessary," Reginald said irritably. "It's boring. Besides, the sooner I start moving around, the sooner I'll mend."

"Well, you know best," Mason said, dubiously, "but it was a close call."

"I'm a little weak right now due to loss of blood, but I'll get over it."

"How's Willard?" Mason asked uncomfortably. "Is he still . . ."

Reginald nodded. "Still in critical condition, but the doctors think he'll pull through. He's got a strong constitution."

"Poor devil," Mason murmured, and then catching Reginald's eye, he added hastily, "I didn't like him, but damnit, Reg, I never wished him harm either."

"Nevertheless, I'm sure you'll be far from crushed to learn that once he pulls through he'll leave the service in a cloud of disgrace. Even though he had no idea Ilsa was a German spy, he let slip important information to an enemy agent."

"I was astounded to discover Willard was involved," Mason admitted as the coffee arrived. "It never entered my mind."

Reginald smiled. "You were so worried Mrs. Mansfield would be implicated that you avoided the subject of Philips's female visitor altogether." Mason shifted uneasily in the chair and Reginald added, "Frankly, I blame myself for not tumbling on to it sooner. The unique description of the woman haunted me, but I didn't connect Ilsa with Willard until it was too late, even though I had seen her with him that night in the restaurant."

"It's a damn shame the count and Ilsa escaped. By the time we rescued you and Willard and you came to your senses and told us who was behind it, it was too late to stop them. They were already on their way to Germany on a Portuguese freighter."

"I should have explained it to you in my note," Reginald said bitterly. "But I was too cocky for my own good. I wanted to play the scene out alone. I thought I only had Ilsa to deal with. It was very fortunate you showed up when you did and made such a fuss outside. If you hadn't, the count would have taken the time to make certain I was dead."

"He still found time to set a fire," Mason reminded him.

"So he did, and when he hears about my remarkable recovery, he'll be devastated, no doubt. Somehow I feel we'll meet again in the near future to settle our little dispute once and for all," Reginald predicted grimly.

"Very likely," Mason drawled.

Chapter Seven

"IT'S NOTHING YOU need to worry about, Mrs. Powell," Dr. Hollis said cheerfully as Amanda emerged from behind the screen in his consulting office, located in Harley Street. "A slight weight loss and disinterest in food is often experienced at a time like this."

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked irritably. She hated it when physicians evaded giving their patients a straightforward answer. It made her imagine the worst.

"Have a seat, my dear," Dr. Hollis said. "I have some very pleasant news for you."

Amanda sat on the very edge of the oak chair, suddenly apprehensive.

Dr. Hollis sat back, tugging at his side whiskers, and said in an avuncular voice, "Women often experience symptoms such as yours when they are in the early stages of pregnancy." When Amanda didn't reply, he added soothingly, "Since this is your first, you're understandably nervous, but you needn't be. You're in the pink of health."

"You're absolutely certain that . . . that there can be no mistake," Amanda said breathlessly. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind she had known all along what the fits of dizziness and nausea meant, but she had ignored it.

"You're only five weeks along," Dr. Hollis said kindly, misinterpreting her anxiety.

"Thank you, Doctor" Amanda said solemnly, standing up to go.

"I know how happy you must be," Dr. Hollis said as he escorted her to the door. "Your anxiety about having a child was probably what prevented you from conceiving before this. I had a feeling if you and your husband just relaxed and took it easy, everything would turn out all right. You're perfectly healthy. Even though I didn't get an opportunity to examine Michael, I was convinced it was just tension that was getting in the way."

"But," Amanda said, puzzled, "Michael told me he had been examined."

"Did he?" Dr. Hollis coughed. "Well, I'm sure he was, but not by me." When Amanda looked uneasy, he added hastily, "Michael is a sensitive young man. He probably felt he wanted to see a stranger about such a delicate matter rather than the old family physician he grew up with. It strikes some men like that. They're embarrassed. They would rather let a stranger look at them and be privy to such intimate knowledge. There's no harm in it. The main thing to keep in mind now is to get plenty of rest, fresh air, and don't forget, you're eating for two," he reminded her with a chuckle.

As Amanda stepped outside into the warm sunshine, she counted back and blanched. Five weeks! The child growing inside her was Reginald's, not Michael's. She and Michael had not been intimate during that time. As she slowly walked down the busy street, the sun warming the back of her neck, she was in a daze. She barely heard the noise or noticed the jostling pedestrians.

When she had first begun the affair with Reginald, she had foreseen the danger of getting pregnant, but her desperation to conceive a child had convinced her it was all to the good if she did. Faced with the sudden reality, she was stunned. Instinctively she wanted to confide in Reginald, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized such a course was impossible. Neither one of them really believed the affair could go on indefinitely. There had been no promises. And yet I love him, she thought, struggling fiercely against tears. She had spent hours talking to Reginald about a multitude of subjects, but they seldom if ever discussed their respective spouses and avoided altogether exploring the depth of the feelings they had for each other. The relationship had been allowed to drift. Reginald had already overstayed his visit, and he would be

returning to New York momentarily.

Amanda knew if she waited a week or two to tell him, Michael would think the child was his. She had certainly prayed hard enough for a child and God had answered her prayers in His own mysterious way. Michael need never know the child wasn't his.

She couldn't delude herself any longer with the selfish, vain fantasy that if she left Michael, Reginald would divorce his wife and marry her. Although Reginald might be unhappy in his own marriage, and he had indicated once or twice that he was, there was no assurance that he would leave his wife for her. How droll Sally would think it if she knew what had become of her prim and proper friend. As Amanda walked home she reminded herself of the danger and mystery that surrounded Reginald. She loved Reginald Keyes whether she wanted to or not, regardless of whether he loved her in return. Her throat began to ache and tears clouded her vision.

Another problem was the child. Eugenia would be suspicious. Amanda's heart was riddled with guilt and her mind raced with the wildest plans. Somehow she had to hide her pregnancy. Once she had the child she would have the strength to face up to Eugenia's acrimonious remarks. She would have to think up an excuse and go away for a year. She had to come up with a plan, and quick!

At the same time that Amanda made up her mind to end the affair, Reginald decided to divorce Helen and ask Amanda to marry him. The decision was not a frivolous one. The experience of loving and being loved in return had come late in life. He guessed rightly that Amanda would never have had an affair with him, no matter how attracted she was, if her own marriage were not unsatisfactory. He was filled with a desire to make her happy, deliriously happy. He knew he could, and that knowledge filled him with a tremendous surge of power and joy. Unlike the other women in his life, Amanda had never asked him for anything. She didn't want money or prestige. She had no desire to worm her way into his heart in order to extract international secrets for a foreign country. The only reason she risked her reputation and the threat of scandal was because she wanted to be in his company for a few hours. For a moment, without realizing it, Reginald smiled and he looked much younger. It was heady stuff, being in

love. He had never before realized just how invigorating it felt, not only to be in love but to be loved in return. And there was no doubt in his mind that Amanda loved him. He felt it when she touched him. He saw it in her eyes when she looked at him, and he knew it by the way she gave herself to him so completely in their lovemaking.

If New York society was shocked by the divorce and rejected him and his new bride, they could live in Europe or South Africa. The thought of Europe brought him back to reality and he frowned. War was fast enveloping the continent. He had been called back to New York, but he had delayed his departure. He didn't want to leave England and the woman he loved without first obtaining assurances that when he returned she would be his. As he entered the Ritz, Reginald made up his mind he would speak to Amanda tonight. He would sound her out about obtaining a divorce. Her loyalty, sense of duty, and abhorrence of scandal would make her refuse at first. He was confident, however, once he had impressed upon her his own sincerity and honorable intentions, that his persuasive abilities, coupled with her love for him, would eventually win her over.

"Mr. Keyes," the desk clerk called out for the second time as Reginald breezed past on his way to the elevators.

"Yes," Reginald inquired cheerfully as he returned to the desk.

"These messages arrived while you were out."

One was a telegram from New York. The other was a plain white envelope that had been hand delivered, with his name printed neatly on the front in black ink. He decided to open the telegram first.

SARA TO BE MARRIED IN A WEEK.

HELEN

"Damn!" Reginald muttered furiously. Seeing the desk clerk watching him curiously, he walked over to an empty seat near a potted palm and sat down. If he wanted to return home in time for the wedding, he had to make preparations to leave at once. Since Helen had not specified whom Sara was marrying, he had a good idea it was the impoverished English earl Helen had set her sights on. Crushing the paper into a ball, he

threw it into a nearby ashtray. If he didn't immediately leave England he would be unable to prevent his daughter from making a disastrous mistake. Reginald had no idea how Helen had managed to engineer it, but somehow she had convinced Sara she should marry the earl. If he was there, he could put a spoke in her wheels, but that meant leaving Amanda. Angry at this unwelcome bit of news, it was some time before he opened the second message. Like the telegram, it too was brief, but far more devastating in its effect.

Dearest Reg,

The short time we've had together will become one of the most wonderful memories of my life. I shall always treasure it. Regrettably, I have to point out that we have already spent more time together than either of us planned. Postponing the moment of separation has only made it that much harder for me. To be truthful, deep down I am a terrible coward about letting go of people I care about, thus this note rather than facing you in person. My husband knows nothing about our relationship and I am deeply thankful, but I feel that I must try in future to put more effort into making our marriage work.

Thank you for the beautiful moments we had together.

Amanda

After reading the letter over, Reginald stared at it in numb disbelief. She couldn't mean it. She couldn't love her husband. Reading the letter over again, this time more carefully, Reginald paled as he realized she hadn't actually said she loved him. Trying to make her marriage work wasn't the same thing as loving. My God, he thought, stunned, his confidence shaken. I've assumed she loved me and would willingly leave her husband and her life in England if I asked her. Was it all wishful thinking? Is it possible that all Amanda was looking for was a casual affair with no entanglements? He felt weak. A voice whispered, Don't panic. She loves you. You know she does. She's afraid to commit herself because you were so stupidly slow about revealing the depth of your own feelings. If she thought all you wanted was a relationship without strings, then she would act just this way.

He had to know the truth. If she loved him as he hoped, he

would force her to leave her husband. On the other hand if she truly loved her husband, what then? His hands went icy with fear but he knew he had to take the chance. He would never forgive himself if he didn't admit his feelings.

Reginald knew that he must return to New York as soon as possible. But he resolved that someday he would come back and find Amanda.

Chapter Eight

A FLUFFY WHITE rug covered the polished wooden floor. Frilly curtains hung at the wide windows and the expensive wallpaper, a colorful pattern of wild birds and trees, matched the bedspread on the four-poster bed. Draped above the bed was a silken canopy and resting against the satin pillows was a shabby teddy bear. The furniture was white oak. At the foot of the bed was a hope chest. To the left was a vanity with a mirror above it. On top of the vanity were a variety of boxes, vials, and jars containing pins, ribbons, rice powder, scent, creams, lotions, and jewelry. The room was obviously that of a young girl.

"You are a most ungrateful, silly child," Helen said with exasperation as she fanned herself with a dark green and white Oriental silk fan. She sat on the edge of her daughter's bed and was trying without much success to reason with her. "It's not as if I were asking you to marry beneath you. Basil is an earl. You will be a countess," she said slowly, as if she were speaking to someone whose intelligence was in question. "And you will have a castle of your very own. Best of all," she pointed out shrewdly, "you will be completely independent. Only a very foolish young girl could possibly turn down such an attractive proposition."

"I . . . I don't love him," Sara muttered in a low voice, her lower lip trembling and a prickling behind her eyelids signaling that she was close to tears. Whatever else happens, she thought desperately, I musn't cry. Tears only made her mother more sarcastic. It was highly unlikely a miracle would rescue her from her mother's wrath. In any case, wishing the

earl of Chatham would be struck down by lightning or die of sunstroke while horseback riding was hardly kind. And he had been really nice to her. If only the letter she had written to her father and tried to smuggle out with her maid, Kitty, hadn't been intercepted by the butler and turned over to her mother. Poor Kitty had been fired, and now Sara was alone in a household of spies who watched over her every move and reported back to her mother. She had been locked in her room like a criminal and not permitted any visitors.

"That's exactly the sort of immature statement I would expect you to make," Helen said sharply. "What do you know of love anyway? You're only eighteen."

"But, Mother," Sara pleaded, "I couldn't possibly marry Basil, that is . . . the earl, if I didn't love him. It wouldn't be fair to him."

"And what makes you think you couldn't fall in love with him? Basil is very attractive and exceedingly charming. I'm told there are many young ladies who would consider themselves fortunate indeed to receive a proposal of marriage from him."

"I'm sure there are," Sara said unhappily, "but . . . he's too old."

"Too old!" For a moment Helen looked amused. "A young girl needs an older man to steady her down," she countered, ignoring the fact that the earl's reputation was far from the steadying kind.

"I can't marry him, Mother. I . . . I'm in love with someone else," Sara blurted out, fearful of the reception this confession would evoke in her mother.

Helen's eyes narrowed and her mouth set into grim lines, but she didn't speak for several moments. The longer the silence held out, the more uneasy Sara became, and she tried to comfort herself with the thought that her mother couldn't force her to marry someone against her will.

"I know all about you and Tom Wyler," Helen said coldly. "Why do you suppose he wants to marry you? Surely you aren't naive enough to think it's for love."

"He does love me," Sara said indignantly.

"He may like you well enough," Helen conceded, "but it's your fortune he's after."

"Tom isn't poor," Sara protested hotly.

"No, dear, he isn't poor, but he wouldn't turn his nose up at ten million dollars either."

"That's not what he's after."

"I happen to know for a fact," Helen said dryly, "that Tom's father bets quite heavily on the horses, and three months ago he dropped a great deal of money. The family isn't about to lose the roof over their heads, but they would be hypocrites if they didn't welcome marriage to an heiress."

"No, I don't believe you," Sara shouted, jumping off the bed, her eyes swimming in tears. "Tom isn't mercenary. He wants to marry me because he loves me and for no other reason."

"I can understand why you're so upset and I sympathize with you. In fact, I blame myself for not educating you sooner about the facts of life. But I refuse to allow you to throw your life away on someone so unsuitable. Tom is a very practical, materialistic young man, not a knight in shining armor. You must come to your senses, Sara, and realize Tom isn't the sort of man you should marry."

"You don't know him at all," Sara insisted tearfully. "He's warm and sincere and . . ."

"It's better to discover the truth now than after you're married," Helen interpreted ruthlessly. "You're not a beauty. You're sweet, gentle, moderately intelligent, well brought up, and graceful. Those are the very qualities the earl mentioned about you. He thinks very highly of you, and unlike Tom, he has something of value to offer you in exchange for your fortune. Once you're wed, you'll have a title before your name and be given entrée to the world of the aristocracy. Nothing," she said proudly, "can ever take that away from you or your children."

"I think you're horrid. Tom isn't after my money," Sara said, flushing. "I don't care what you say. I won't marry the earl. I won't," she sobbed, collapsing on the bed in tears.

Helen stood up and stared down at her daughter. "I had no idea you would put up such a fuss. To be honest, Sara, I thought you would be more sensible. I'm afraid I have already sent out invitations to the wedding."

"Mother, how could you?" Sara shrieked.

"Tom hasn't put in an appearance since he learned of your betrothal. If he loved you, surely he would have come here as

soon as he heard of your engagement and demanded an interview with you."

"If he did, you wouldn't have told me," Sara muttered sullenly.

"You must take my word for it that he didn't."

"If he didn't come it was because he must think I really want to marry the earl. He wouldn't come if he thought that. He's too proud. I hate you, Mother. I hate you," Sara wept. "I don't care if you torture me, I'll never marry the earl."

"There's no need for such melodramatics," Helen said irritably. "I'm your mother and all I want is your happiness. If you would only realize I know best and trust me." Seeing Sara's expression she sighed, "Very well. If you like, I'll send for Tom and you can talk to him. Find out how he really feels. I've tried to shield you as best I could, but perhaps that wasn't the right thing to do."

"You'll send for Tom?" Sara asked tremulously.

"Yes, dear, although I can't compel him to come."

"He'll come," Sara said defiantly.

"Fine, it's settled, then. I'll send a note over right away. With any luck, he'll be here this evening."

Her mother breezed out of the room, closing and locking the door behind her.

On hearing how the interview went, the earl of Chatham frowned. "You really aren't going to send for the boy?"

"I believe I shall."

"Is that wise?"

"Very wise indeed," Helen said as she addressed the envelope. "I don't know why I didn't think of it before."

"I'm afraid your strategy leaves me in the dark."

Helen paused in her writing. "I've made inquiries and everything I told her about Tom's father is true. He can't deny his father is a gambler or that he lost a great sum of money on the horses."

"She may not care," Basil said, "and besides, what will she say when she learns he's done everything he could, short of breaking into the house, to see her?"

"She may want to believe him," Helen admitted, continuing to write, "but she'll doubt his sincerity all the same. They're both unsophisticated and very sensitive. All society believes Sara wants to marry you of her own free will. My

guess is that Tom half believes it himself. If she faces him with the story about his father, he will be shocked and insulted at the accusation that he wants to marry her for her money. They will end by quarreling. Afterward, I am quite certain Sara will marry you."

"What about your husband?" Basil drawled. "Have you made certain he won't be able to interfere?"

"Reginald is safely in London," Helen assured him grimly as she slipped the note into an envelope and sealed it. "The telegram he receives calling him home to attend the wedding will somehow be in error. There will be an unfortunate mixup in dates. Those things happen. By the time he gets here, you and Sara will be on your honeymoon."

"You know," Basil said admiringly, "it's too bad, really, that Sara didn't inherit any of your ruthlessness. I believe I could come to care for her deeply if she had."

Helen was none too pleased by this compliment. "See here, Basil. I don't want you to treat Sara badly. She is very young and innocent. She needs gentle handling."

"Oh you needn't concern yourself over that," Basil said easily. "I shall treat her with kid gloves. She'll adore being my wife."

Tom paced about the drawing room restlessly. It had been a month since he had last seen Sara, a month filled with rumors of an engagement, innuendos, and gossip, all of which he had nobly ignored. He had tried to see Sara, but was told that she was otherwise engaged and did not wish to see him. Nor did she write to him with an explanation. Believing at first that this was the work of Sara's mother and not Sara's own wishes, he had persevered.

It was only after a formal announcement of the engagement had appeared in all the papers and wedding invitations had been sent out that Tom had stopped trying to see Sara and begun to accept the stories as true. Feeling betrayed and ashamed at having made a fool of himself before his peers, he was bitter and angry. When he had first received the curt note asking him to come and see her, Tom was inclined not to reply, but good manners and curiosity mingled with the last vestiges of hope and he accepted. His sister, Betty, had warned him not to get his expectations up. Sara was probably ashamed of her cowardly conduct and merely wished to break

off their engagement face to face. At one time Tom would not have believed this, but today he did. It's really too much, he thought resentfully as he paced about the room, his fists clenched in his pockets, that after refusing to see me she summons me here and then keeps me cooling my heels.

At this moment Sara entered the room. She wore a pretty pink cotton frock that she had never worn before, in order to be seen at her best. She had lost weight and there were dark smudges under her eyes caused by sleeplessness and worry. Turning the moment he heard the door open, Tom stood at the far end of the room glaring at her.

Sara flushed, and smiled shyly at him. "Hello," she said, closing the door and taking a tentative step forward.

"Hello," Tom said gruffly.

"Tom," Sara whispered, throwing her arms about him and hugging him fiercely. "I've missed you so."

"Have you?" Tom said caustically, his body rigid and unresponsive. "I should have thought you would have been too busy to miss me."

"You can't believe I'm going to marry Basil," Sara said, slowly releasing him.

"Of course I believe it," Tom snapped. "Everyone else does. Why shouldn't I?"

"But it's not true," Sara said earnestly. "You must believe me, Tom. Mother sent the invitations out without my knowledge. You don't know what I've had to put up with. It's been ghastly. I've been locked in my room. I haven't been allowed to see anyone except Mother, the servants, and . . . Basil. She wants me to marry him. It's all her idea."

"I see. And you don't care for him at all, I suppose," Tom muttered.

"Basil has been awfully nice to me," she said, stung by his aloof attitude. "But I don't want to marry him."

"Being a countess doesn't make a whit of difference," Tom said jealously.

"I don't understand you. I thought you would be glad to see me." Sara was hurt.

"Did you, by God?" he fumed. "After all that I've been through, with my friends laughing at me behind my back and my family feeling sorry for me. I acted like an idiot over you, and what did I receive for my pains but silence. You never even wrote to me to explain about this earl fellow."

"I told you I was a prisoner," Sara explained. "Mother wouldn't let me write to anyone or see anyone."

"Just how gullible do you think I am? Your mother wouldn't have allowed an announcement of the wedding to appear in all the papers and gone so far as to send out invitations if she didn't think you'd go through with it. And don't say I don't know your mother, because I can't believe she's as mush-brained as all that. No minister is going to marry you against your wishes."

"That's just it. She isn't mush-brained at all. She's cruel and calculating."

"If you intend to go through with a marriage to a man old enough to be your father just so you can call yourself a countess, then you'll have to live with it, my girl," Tom said harshly. "There's no point in making up to me. You can't have your cake and eat it too."

"How can you think such a terrible thing?" Sara was appalled and indignant. "I'm not going to marry Basil, even if he is attractive and not half as old as you seem to think."

"Changed your mind, have you?" Tom said nastily. "Got cold feet?"

"I've never wanted to marry anyone but you," Sara insisted passionately.

Tom wavered. He wanted to believe her, but he was afraid if he did and she changed her mind again he would be more of a fool than ever. He decided to proceed cautiously. "Suppose I say I believe you and that I still care for you in spite of everything. Will you formally announce our engagement in the papers and send that fellow packing?"

"Yes," Sara said huskily. "Of course I will." Since she took the opportunity to put her arms around him again, Tom responded in kind.

Although they had officially made up, the seeds of doubt lingered on in both their minds. Tom was the first to give vent to his suspicions.

"How is it that your mother allowed me to see you today, when she refused me admittance on all those other occasions?"

"She must have realized I wouldn't give in and marry Basil," Sara murmured against his chest, and then added awkwardly, "Is your father a gambler, Tom?"

"A gambler?" Tom pulled away and looked down at her in

surprise. "What makes you ask that?"

Sara turned red. "I heard he bets on the horses."

"So do most men, your father included."

"Yes, but I heard your father lost a great deal of money," Sara faltered, embarrassed.

"Well, to be honest, my dad is a bit too fond of the horses. He's terribly lucky, though. In a few months he'll have made it all back and then some I daresay. It's the excitement." Seeing the look of dismay on Sara's face he added, "You needn't worry that I've got the bug. I hate like everything to lose, and as soon as I do, I quit. I haven't got the stomach for it."

"You never told me your father gambled," Sara said miserably.

"I don't see why I should have," Tom said, frowning. "You won't be marrying him."

Sara was staring at him, a sad, wistful look on her face. "I imagine your family must be terribly worried."

"Worried? Why should they be?"

"Your father has so many children to support," Sara murmured, "and with him losing all that money . . ."

"Oh, they're all used to it by now," Tom said carelessly. "Wait a bit, though. You're not thinking I can't support you are you? It isn't so. My grandfather left me a packet and I intend to open my own architectural firm with my brother Charlie."

"Yes, I know," Sara said in a small voice, compelled to continue despite a warning voice that cautioned her to hold her tongue. "But I imagine your family will be relieved to . . ."

"To what?" Tom said, exasperated.

"To learn we're getting married."

"Relieved," Tom repeated, confused, and then as her meaning hit him he flushed up to the roots of his hair and said stiffly, "Are you suggesting I'm a fortune hunter?"

"No," Sara said in a low voice. But since she avoided looking him in the eye, Tom was left in no doubt as to her true feelings.

"If that don't beat all," he said bitterly. "First you jilt me for an earl, and then when you get tired of him, you lure me over here. You play up to me so I'll fall into your clutches again, and when I do, you insult me with accusations of mar-

rying you for your money. You are a heartless little flirt, that's what you are."

"I'm sorry, Tom," Sara said tremulously, "but I've been going over and over it in my mind. Your father lost his money right around the time you asked me to be your wife. It's true, isn't it? It all happened about the same time," Sara challenged, verbalizing the fear she had nurtured since her mother's stormy visit.

"Believe what you like," Tom said grimly.

"If it isn't true, tell me so," Sara pleaded. "Tell me you don't want to marry me for my money."

"You needn't worry about that," Tom said, incensed. "I don't want any part of you or your filthy money. You're free to marry the earl or whoever else manages to capture your fickle heart."

"Tom wait," Sara shouted, instantly remorseful, but he stormed out of the room. Sara dashed after him, oblivious of her tears or the shocked looks of the servants as she cried out, "Please wait. Hear me out." Tom kept on going, the back of his neck red as a beet and he slammed the door on his way out. Sara knew she had lost him and destroyed all hope of a reconciliation. He would never listen to her now. Humiliated, she fled to her room where she gave way to a fit of violent sobbing.

Helen brought a tray to her daughter's room at noon two days later and laid it carefully down on the side table. "You must eat something, Sara. You'll make yourself ill."

Sara stared in front of her listlessly. "I'm not hungry."

"Basil and I are very worried about you. He asks about you all the time."

"Does he?" Sara said without much interest. Tom had sent back all her letters unopened.

"We were both hoping you could join us for supper tonight in the main dining hall."

"Does that mean you're not locking me in anymore?" Sara said in an expressionless voice.

"You know I did it for your own good."

"There isn't any need anymore, so you needn't worry," Sara said. "You've succeeded in making Tom hate me."

"You're upset, but eventually you'll realize that Tom

wasn't meant for you. You'll end up by thanking me for preventing you from making a disastrous mistake."

"If I were to marry Basil," Sara said unexpectedly, "I could go away from here and do exactly as I liked. Isn't that so, Mother?"

"Certainly," Helen said, pleased at this sudden capitulation.

"In that case," Sara said, her voice no longer devoid of emotion, "I will accept his offer of marriage and shall go through with your plans on one condition."

"What is that?" Helen asked warily.

"That you give me your word you will never write to me, speak to me, or in any way try to contact me again, ever."

Taken aback by the vehemence of her daughter's passion even more than the implication of the words themselves, Helen replied, "You may do as you wish, of course, but I hope in time you will realize I'm not such a monster as you make me out to be." She reached out to touch Sara's hair.

Sara shuddered and moved out of her mother's reach.

"Are you joining us for dinner?" Helen asked after an uncomfortable pause.

Sara nodded and her mother had to be content with this sign of acquiescence. Although she did not show it, Helen had been shocked by her daughter's hostility. The struggle between achieving her own desires and faint traces of maternal instinct fought for supremacy. For once, maternal instinct won. "If the idea of marrying Basil is at all repugnant to you," she said gently, "you needn't go through with it."

Sara smiled at her, but it was a hard, cold smile that Helen had never seen before. "I assure you, Mother, I want to marry Basil."

On the way to inform the earl of their success, Helen couldn't shake a feeling of disquietude that robbed her of the sense of elation she would have normally experienced at seeing her plans come to fruition.

Two days before the *Queen Christina* docked in New York, the captain of the ship took it upon himself to congratulate Reginald personally on the marriage of his daughter to the earl of Chatham and offered his sympathy that business had prevented Reginald from attending the wedding himself. Until that moment, Reginald, who had chosen to remain incom-

municado in his cabin, had been ignorant of the exact date. His wrath at what he felt had been another deliberate act of duplicity mounted to a fevered pitch. With no outlet to relieve his ire, he waited impatiently for the ship to dock.

His usual good humor and tolerance had deteriorated into a foul temper.

Feeling restless, he picked up a copy of the *Times* on the ride home only to discover that Sara's wedding was very much in the news. He read that the wedding had cost over five hundred thousand dollars. The bride's dress of white satin and French lace, had cost eighty thousand dollars. White roses and pink orchids decorated the ballroom, and in the middle of the room a white marble fountain with solid gold cupids had been erected. Resting on their shoulders were golden flasks from which poured a never ending supply of French champagne. An iced sculpture in the form of nymphs cavorting among the trees had been on display, and a representative of every member of the New York social register, as well as members of royalty, had attended. A picture of Sara and her new husband starting out on their honeymoon, with Sara smiling stiffly for the photographers, stared up at him. He threw the paper on the floor, muttering an oath.

As head of the committee to restore ancient landmarks, Helen was busily engaged in explaining to two of the other members the difficulties they faced in saving a particular building in lower Manhattan when Reginald appeared in the doorway leading onto the patio. It was here that Helen had chosen to conduct business. Beach umbrellas had been set up to protect them from the sun. On one table were pitchers of lemonade and iced tea as well as an assortment of small sandwiches and cookies.

All three ladies looked up simultaneously. At the sight of Reginald, his hair windblown and his face mottled with anger, none of them had the courage to murmur a greeting, let alone ask him to join them.

"I want to see you, Helen," Reginald said harshly.

Helen, holding her head high, answered calmly, "Welcome home, Reg dear. I'm afraid I'm busy right now, but as soon as I'm through here . . ."

"I want to see you *now*," Reginald snapped, startling the committee members and causing Helen to flush a deep red.

"Very well," she agreed. Rising, she turned to her fellow

members. "While I'm gone, why don't you ladies partake of some refreshments. I shan't be long."

As Helen allowed Reginald to lead her to the drawing room where Sara had conducted her fateful interview with Tom Wyler, she considered and then discarded several lines of defense, ranging from innocence and indignation to bold admittance of the truth. In the end, she decided to see what opening move Reginald would take before committing herself. His arrogant manner combined with his tone of voice, and the fact that he had come straight to her rather than retire to his room to change first, indicated he was very angry indeed. But she had expected this. Since Sara's marriage was a fait accompli, he would have to accept it with as much good grace as possible. She knew she would have to look forward to several weeks of sarcastic remarks and coldness until he got over it, but she was prepared to endure this as the price she had to pay for winning. There had been times in the past when he was so angry with her that he had made embarrassing comments in front of guests to upset her, but since they were alone and the threat of embarrassment was no longer a possibility, Helen breathed easier. She didn't have long to wait for the explosion. As soon as the door shut, Reginald turned on her.

"You're the sorriest excuse for a mother that I've ever seen," he snarled, "rushing your daughter into marriage with a mercenary roué like the earl of Chatham."

"I didn't force her," Helen said, frowning. "She wanted to marry him."

"She wouldn't have wanted to without a little prompting from you."

"If you had been here for her wedding instead of gallivanting around London," Helen said loftily, "you would have seen for yourself how the matter stood."

"I came as soon as I received your telegram," Reginald said coldly.

"That's quite impossible. If you had come promptly you would have been here in time."

"If I were you," Reginald said, roughly grabbing her arm, "I wouldn't add insult to injury by blatantly lying. I'm in no mood to be trifled with. I warned you to leave Sara out of your manipulating games and you deliberately schemed to carry off your coup while I was safely out of the way."

"Sara is happy with her husband," Helen assured him,

making no move to break free.

"Since I have only your word for that, I can hardly take it to be true."

"I understand how you must feel," Helen said in a voice one uses to calm an obstinate child. "Arriving home to discover your daughter had been married in your absence must have been a shock. But dragging me away from my friends to browbeat, maul, and then accuse me of plotting against you and ruining our daughter's life is hardly going to set matters to right. I have only Sara's welfare at heart."

"You've never considered Sara's feelings or anyone else's in your entire life," Reginald said harshly. "Marriage to an earl is what *you* want. You're the most unnatural mother I've ever run across. A common streetwalker would make a more concerned mother."

"How dare you say that," Helen shouted, twisting out of his grasp. "You never see your children. You only spend a few weeks out of the year at home."

"Has it never occurred to you I might be home more often if my wife were more accommodating?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Helen demanded icily. "I've never refused you your rights."

"Damn it, Helen, a man needs a woman to be soft and gentle and tender. He doesn't want to lie in bed with a cobra, whose only avenue of satisfaction lies in winning social power games."

"Is that what *she* provides you with," Helen sneered, "your London whore?"

Eyes blazing, he slapped her.

Stunned, Helen reached up and touched her flaming cheek. She could hardly believe he had struck her.

"I think the time has come to discuss a divorce," he said flatly moving to the window.

"A divorce!" Helen was aghast.

"I can't imagine the idea comes as any great surprise," Reginald said, his back to her.

"I'll never agree to one."

Reginald turned, puzzled by the emotion in her voice. "Why not?" he asked curiously. "You can't pretend there's any love left, if there ever was. I'll be generous. You don't have to worry about that."

"There's never been a divorce in my family and . . . and

there never will be. I have a position to uphold in society. If you try to obtain one, I'll fight you every inch of the way."

"Think about it, Helen," Reginald urged, the moment of violence past. "Have we ever really been happy as a couple? We don't want the same things. We don't have the same friends. I have affairs, which you know about and which must be humiliating for you. And as you pointed out earlier, I'm home only a few weeks out of the year. Wouldn't divorce be the most sensible solution? We could part friends."

"You belong to me," Helen said with sudden ferocity. "She can't have you. She can continue being your strumpet as long as she likes. I don't care about that. But she can never be your wife. I'm the only Mrs. Reginald Keyes there ever was or ever will be."

"I'm not leaving you for her," he said bitterly.

"If you disgrace me by applying for a divorce," Helen threatened, "I'll make you regret it. You'll never see your son again."

"I don't believe it," Reginald said after a slight pause. "You're terrified. You're scared to death that if we get a divorce you'll be held up as a figure of ridicule and your social standing will be in jeopardy. My God, Helen, other women have gotten divorces and survived. Don't you realize you've arrived? You don't need the illusion of a stable marriage to support you anymore. Half society has obtained divorces. Divorce is no longer the taboo it once was."

"You don't understand," Helen said, straightening her dress and changing tactics. "We're both reasonable, sophisticated people. We can come to some sort of agreement. I apologize for saying what I did about . . . about your women friends. I had no right to do so. It was tactless of me. You know I've never objected before. You say you don't wish to divorce me for another woman. Very well then, why can't we go on as we have been? Is that so terrible?"

"I'm going away," Reginald said wearily. "Tell the world we're a devoted couple. Tell them I'm a bastard or whatever you think will go over well. I don't care."

"Where are you going?" Helen asked unsteadily.

"As far away as I can get. I won't push for a divorce since it seems to send you into a panic and I have no reason to, but neither will I continue with this mockery of a marriage."

"Get out, then. Get out and don't come back," Helen shouted after him. Once he was gone, she burst into tears. The tears were not those of a woman who has just lost her husband and is grief stricken. They were the tears of a frightened, angry woman, a woman who has been used to having her own way and has finally come up against a will stronger than her own.

Reginald went straight to Mason, who had returned to New York the previous week. He took nothing with him to remind him of his married life except pictures of his children. These he removed from the silver frames and slipped into the pocket of his jacket. Even his clothing, still neatly packed away in trunks, he left behind. As he rode past the stately elm trees, the gardenia bushes and the mansion he had purchased with Helen in the early days of their marriage, he had no regrets. Objectively he noted that there was no overwhelming joy or satisfaction in the deed. Even his anger had melted away.

"You look like hell," Mason said cheerfully as Reginald sat across from him in a brown leather chair.

"From all the correspondence I received in London, I gathered you were pretty anxious to see me. So here I am."

"You gathered right," Mason said, "but only if you've recovered enough from the Philips affair."

"I'm totally recovered," Reginald assured him.

"Good. You're needed on a new assignment here at home."

"I'd rather be abroad."

Mason stared at him. "Most of our men would prefer to be assigned at home instead of having to tramp around the world, leaving their families and loved ones behind."

"Then give the job to them."

"I haven't got a clue as to what's making you act like a turtle who's just had his last meal snatched from his lips, but damnit Reg, this is important. I need someone I can depend on to get the job done."

Reginald was unmoved.

"I'm sure I'm not the only man you can depend on."

"I happen to believe," Mason said doggedly, "that we Americans are a very naive, unsophisticated lot, and our very innocence is what's going to put our country in jeopardy if and when we join the melee in Europe."

"Most people believe the war will be over in a few months, a year at most."

"You and I both know that's a fairy tale. Our country is swamped with nice little Hun businessmen, attaché's and the like who are at this very moment worming their way into areas that could prove exceedingly dangerous to us in the future. Wilson's a pacifist, but I've always felt you have to be prepared for any eventuality. We're too damn lax. We need to tighten our security system and be on the alert, but I need proof that information is being utilized by the Huns in a way that could endanger our country."

"There are dozens of men you could use on this job," Reginald said. "I could name three straight off. You don't need me."

"I don't think you heard me correctly," Mason said coldly. "I'm asking *you* to take on this particular job."

"And I'm telling you that as a free agent," Reginald said quietly, "I'm not interested."

"Not interested?" Mason glowered at him.

"I don't get paid for the work I do, and up until now I've never refused an assignment. Any rank amateur could accomplish the task you suggest with a minimum of risk. I've put in my time on tedious, boring jobs. I'm ready for something more stimulating. And don't tell me there isn't anything, not with a war on." Reginald's eyes narrowed. "I want to be in the thick of it, Mason. I want a tough, dangerous, and, above all, interesting assignment abroad. I'm volunteering, but if you don't stop acting like a prize ass, I'll go to Europe on my own and offer my services to one of the allies. I don't think they'll turn me down."

Unconsciously, Mason picked up his gold fountain pen and began tapping the desk as he glared at Reginald. "I don't like it," he said finally, tossing the pen aside. "You come in here looking like death warmed over, refuse a valid assignment, and then announce your intentions of accepting only the most dangerous ones even if that means applying to another country. It's not like you, Reg, not like you at all. And I don't much care for the desperate look in your eyes. Not feeling suicidal, by any chance?"

Reginald considered. "No."

"I only ask," Mason said, clearing his throat, "because once or twice I've seen it happen. A man comes in here feeling like hell. For one reason or another he thinks his options have all run out and he gets desperate. He requests a difficult

assignment and begins to make mistakes. That's the last time I see him alive."

"I'm touched by your concern for my welfare," Reginald said dryly, "but you needn't worry. I have a strong self-preservation instinct, and no matter what I look like, I'm not about to get careless."

"Um!"

"That's not a terribly enlightening phrase," Reginald said, amused.

"Naturally there is something like you suggest," Mason conceded, "but it's the sort of project that if you're caught, you'll probably be shot. You can't expect any help from us."

"Just the sort of thing I had in mind."

"We need someone to go to Antwerp and pose as a wealthy American arms manufacturer of German descent," Mason said.

"I believe I could manage that."

"We would provide you with all the information you would need as to background, family relations, business contacts, and so on."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Establish friendly relations with the Germans. Offer the Huns your assistance via arms and money. Flatter them. You believe they will win the war hands down and you want to help them all you can. Although you are an American citizen, your heart is pure Prussian. You love everything Prussian. You even married a Fraulein, but she is now dead and you have no children. Eastern Europe is a cultural wasteland. Germany is superior to all other countries, etc, etc."

"To what purpose?" Reginald inquired, coming to the point.

"You have to gain their confidence and trust so that you can learn the name of the American firm who is supplying them with funds, ammunition, and even top secret military information. I have my suspicions, but I need irrefutable proof. That's your mission. Bring me the proof I need to present to the president."

"Am I to know whom you suspect?"

"I'd rather you investigate on your own without any hints from me."

"Why am I to go to Antwerp?"

"There's less chance of your being recognized there than in

the heart of Germany. Besides, several American companies have legitimate business with Belgian concerns. The Germans are trying to win them over."

"Won't I be recognized by one of the Americans?" Reginald asked.

"The Americans there come from the Midwest and West. I doubt if you'll run into trouble, but there is a risk. That's why I would prefer to give this job to someone whose face is not as well known as yours."

"When do I start?"

"Just as soon as you memorize the background I'll give you," Mason grunted. "Since you speak German, you won't need any help with the language. But, Reg, do me a favor. Don't take any undue risks. If it looks like your identity is about to be unmasked, don't stick around. Run like hell."

Reginald stood up and smiled as he accepted the bulky file Mason held out to him. "If you don't stop worrying so much, you're going to wind up with ulcers."

Chapter Nine

ACCORDING TO LEGEND, the Roman giant Druon Antigonius cut off the hands of mariners who sailed past his castle without paying tolls and threw them in the Scheldt. From this grisly tale, many Belgians believed the city of Antwerp (to throw the hand) derived its name. It was here that the artist Rubens built his home and lived on the Meir from 1615 until his death in 1640. It was here as well as Liege that the Belgians had made a heroic stand against the invading German army that August. Many of its citizens abandoned their homes and businesses and crossed over into Holland to escape the advancing Germans. For those who remained, Antwerp was not a happy place. Except for the marching Germans, the streets were deserted. There were no friendly smiles, no laughter. The unexpected tenacity and strength of the Belgian defense in Antwerp had taken the Germans by surprise. A token resistance had been expected, but an intensive last-ditch stand was not. It delayed them from reaching France on schedule. They retaliated with harsh and often brutal treatment of the Belgian people.

It was into this tense, hostile atmosphere that Reginald arrived. Aside from the American Ambassador Brand Whitlock and a few official dignitaries and their staff, only two other Americans remained in Antwerp. It wasn't long before he fell in with them.

Under ordinary circumstances, Jack Fitzroy and Luther Adler would never have become friends. The only thing they

had in common was that they were both self-made men whose fortunes had come from the manufacture of arms and ammunition. Both had branched out and were now involved in other enterprises abroad. Jack was Reginald's age. The reason he offered for being in Antwerp was that he owned a china figurine shop. His home base was Chicago. Jack was a tall, good-looking Irishman of the type referred to as the "black" Irish. He had a thick mane of straight black hair, dark, expressive eyes, and an olive complexion. He was muscular. His body was hairy, with black hairs covering his forearms and the knuckles of his slim, artistic fingers. Friendly and outgoing, Jack was never at a loss for words. He was generous to a fault and dressed expensively if a bit loudly. He wasn't above playing a practical joke on his friends. When he had consumed more whiskey than he should, he began to sing melancholy Irish songs and ballads in a strong tenor voice. They usually had unhappy endings, causing him to finish his evening in a maudlin and sentimental mood.

Luther was a German-American who had settled in Pittsburgh and now owned two lace-making companies in addition to his other ventures. One of them was located in Antwerp, the other in Amsterdam. Where money was concerned, Luther was fearful and suspicious. His shyness at meeting new people was often mistaken for pride and arrogance. Luther had only two suits, both of which were out of style, baggy, and usually spotted. Making money was the only thing that excited him. He was in his early fifties, with thin, sparse brown hair and pale blue eyes. Since he had poor eyesight, he wore spectacles and tended to blink and rub the corners of his eyes when he was nervous. Unlike Jack, he was short and stout. He wore sidewhiskers and a full military moustache, which he was quite vain about. He never drank more than two tankards of beer at one sitting, but he made up for this lack when he sat down to eat. Luther's appetite was gargantuan. He had a good many German business contacts and was on friendly terms with some of the Prussian officers. Underneath his stiff exterior, Luther possessed a kind heart and secretly longed to be popular and accepted.

Reginald's adopted character of Max Gunther fit in smoothly with the other two and added another dimension. Like Luther, he claimed German-American descent. He in-

formed them that he also had made his fortune in America in the manufacture of weaponry. Like Jack, he was free with his money but expected to receive first-class service in return. When he drank he would burst into a German beer hall song if coaxed. To Jack and Luther's amusement, Max was obsessively neat about his clothing and fussy about his food. If he found a bone in his fish or a hair on his plate, he complained of queasiness and couldn't finish his meal. He had been married, but his wife was now deceased and he had no children. He claimed he was looking for new investments to sink his money into and made no secret of his German sympathies. The three men became constant companions. They ate together, drank together, had philosophical discussions, lively debates, and shared a concern for the outcome of the war. As American businessmen, they were less troubled over which side would win than how the outcome would affect business. Although Reginald found he liked the two men, he was convinced that at least one of them was a German sympathizer and a traitor. Nevertheless, despite his suspicions, he was unable to unearth the slightest shred of evidence to support this theory.

One evening, an unexpected opportunity arose for him to instigate a scheme that would, he felt, eventually force the culprit's hand. They had all agreed to have supper together in a small restaurant off the Meir when Luther arrived late, which was unusual. He was more unkempt looking than normal, and he appeared pale and shaken. Instead of ordering his customary beer, he requested a schnappes.

"Good heavens, man, what happened to you?" Jack asked.

"Would you believe," Luther said, wiping his forehead which was drenched with sweat, "I was shot at."

"By whom?" both men asked in unison.

"By a fanatical Belgian," Luther muttered. His drink having arrived, he gulped it down in one movement, shuddering as he did so. "I was standing on the sidewalk talking to a German officer, Colonel Hect to be precise, when suddenly a Belgian started screaming and shooting at us. We fell to the ground and miraculously escaped injury."

"Thank God for that," Jack said.

"We were fortunate," Luther grunted. "Some soldiers in a nearby store heard the shots and came to our defense. If they

hadn't, we would be lying in a pool of blood instead of that boy."

Jack shook his head sadly. "It's always the young, passionate ones who are willing to forfeit their life for their country."

"I'm an American citizen and a businessman," Luther said indignantly. "He had no right to shoot at me."

"Your assailant," Reginald said, "should have resigned himself to his fate. His country lost the fight against Germany, and he should have had the sense to accept defeat with good grace instead of acting in such a foolish, irresponsible manner. It won't help his country now that he lies dead."

Jack sighed. "I'm sure that he has a family who will sorely miss him."

"I was nearly killed," Luther complained.

"A great tragedy that would be," Jack said with a smile. "I understand how you feel, and you musn't think I'm a cold-hearted monster." Jack's voice took on an intense, serious tone. "It's just that I understand the anger and fervor of a young lad driven to commit murder and by so doing die a martyr's death rather than stand by while his country is invaded by a foreign power. It's a dreadful thing to see your freedom snatched from you." Finding Reginald watching him curiously, he lightened his tone. "However, I am happy to see you still in one piece."

"Well, it was unfortunate the boy was young," Luther grumbled, "but I am relieved to be alive. Some of your Irish good luck must have rubbed off on me."

"And may it continue to do so," Jack laughed.

"Young hotheads have no foresight," Reginald said, frowning. "They don't ask themselves who the victors will be. Who will win the war and what the consequences will be, eh?"

"Perhaps no one will win," Jack ventured as asked the waiter to refill their drinks.

"Someone must win," Reginald insisted. "And it will be Germany. It must be Germany, because her army is the best in Europe."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Luther said, lowering his voice. "France and Russia together are a formidable enemy."

"And let us not forget," Jack added dryly, "England has the best navy in the western world."

"That is true," Reginald acknowledged grudgingly, "but

Germany's navy is second only to England's, and in the end it will be the army that decides the fate of the world. Russia and France will fall before Germany because they are weak. In the end England, too, will fall."

"Perhaps," Luther conceded uneasily, "but none of this is of any concern to us, so long as America pursues a policy of neutrality."

"I believe what Max is saying is that war is bad for business," Jack suggested humorously.

"No, no." Reginald leaned closer. "That is not what I am saying at all. Gentlemen, I believe with every bone in my body that Germany will be victorious. It is inevitable. Ask yourselves what happens then. Once the war is over, Germany will look to her friends to reward them, and there are great possibilities that lie ahead for the individual who has the foresight to see this and plan ahead."

"I'm not sure what you are suggesting, but I don't like the sound of it," Luther muttered, glancing around him nervously.

"We three," Reginald continued enthusiastically, "are the heads of companies that could have a great deal to do with accelerating the outcome of the war. We are suppliers. The soldiers march bravely into foreign countries according to a plan conceived by generals. But it is our weapons and new discoveries that they use. Without machines guns, without planes and poison gas, the armies of the world would still be using bows and arrows. A war fought on that scale could take years to decide. The country that possesses the best equipment, the most modern, sophisticated techniques, is the country that wins the war." He lowered his voice and continued in a firm tone. "That country is Germany. By helping the Germans, we will be helping ourselves."

Luther frowned and glanced at Jack uneasily.

"It seems to me to be a mite bit dangerous, what you are saying," Jack said slowly. "What if America should enter the war?"

"The president of the United States is a pacifist," Reginald said disdainfully. "He pursues a policy of noninterference and he will continue to do so. Germany doesn't want to go to war against the United States, and the United States has no interest in a European war. Think of the special privileges that could

be ours once the war is over. We are businessmen, are we not? And businessmen not only wish to protect their businesses but to expand and increase their share of profits. After the war, we would no longer be merely men in possession of flourishing enterprises, but heads of monopolies, empire builders."

Reginald sat back and smiled. "Do you agree with my philosophy?" he asked.

"It's pragmatic," Luther grumbled. "But I don't think we should talk openly about such things."

"You can't have always played it safe, Luther," Jack said softly, "or you wouldn't be as successful as you are."

"Come now, Luther," Reginald exclaimed heartily, grasping the other man's arm. "All we need to start is the right contacts. I feel you will be very helpful on that end."

Luther began to rub the corners of his eyes. "I have taken risks in my time, but I am also a cautious man. What Max is suggesting is extremely dangerous and has to be discussed at greater length, but not here and not now."

Though disappointed at the delay, Reginald was secretly pleased by the response he had received. Both men had expressed an interest in his ideas, and he felt he was beginning to make progress. He had established himself in their eyes as an ambitious man with German sympathies and dreams of glory. It was up to his as yet unknown protagonist to make the next move, and Reginald was certain he wouldn't be disappointed. The opportunity was too good to pass up.

Toward the end of the evening, he received a severe jolt that momentarily banished all from his mind. It began innocently enough with Luther debating the propriety of women who volunteered as Red Cross workers.

"It isn't decent," he insisted. "Women belong in the home, not on a battlefield."

"I disagree," Jack said. "It does a man a world of good to awaken from being struck by a bullet or a shell and see the face of an angel of mercy before him, tenderly bathing his wounds and soothing him with kind words."

"What sort of women would leave the security of their homes and loved ones to tramp all over the world?" Luther said, shaking his head in disapproval.

"I should think they must be very brave," Reginald offered.

"Brave, independent, and adventurous," Jack exclaimed enthusiastically. "I know because I've seen them in action and they are magnificent. Only last night I met one and escorted her to her door."

"That's what I mean," Luther said grimly. "Women who are brought up properly don't talk to strange men, let alone accept invitations from them to dine."

"Surely you're not saying I'm strange," Jack quipped. "She was an enchanting creature, and I spent a delightful and innocent half-hour in her company. Her name is Amanda Powell. She can talk circles around you and keep you laughing all the while. If I didn't know better, I would say she was Irish and had kissed the blarney stone."

Luther sniffed. "Women are the same everywhere. They need a strong hand. When they are allowed out in the world instead of at home where they belong, there will be a decline in morals. No good can come of such a thing. It isn't natural."

While the two men continued to argue the point, Reginald tried not to let the shock show on his face. Amanda was here in Antwerp working as a Red Cross volunteer! He felt a rush of color flood his face and controlled an impulse to question Jack at length. Amanda knew him by his real name and could prove to be a real danger without her realizing it.

"Max," Jack said, appealing to him. "Luther is insisting the modern woman is a blasphemy, and I am just telling him how wrong he is. I need you to back me up."

For the next hour Reginald applied himself to the debate, but afterward he could not recall what had been said. He could only think of Amanda's proximity. When it came time to part company, instead of returning to the hotel he went for a walk alone. He wandered the narrow back streets avoiding soldiers and civilians alike until, not surprisingly, he found himself standing in the shadows of a building that faced the Red Cross headquarters. He stood transfixed as nurses in their stiff white uniforms, the red cross indicating their neutrality emblazoned on them, hurried to and fro. Trucks bringing wounded men arrived and departed until the gray light of dawn finally transformed the darkness. Reginald stood where he was, hoping for a glimpse of Amanda. If he recognized her he realized there was nothing he could do, nothing he could say. She would have walked by him oblivious of his eyes upon

her. It would have been the height of folly to contact her. Even if by chance she looked his way and recognized him standing in the shadows, she might not care. Realizing the futility of the impulse that had led him there, Reginald returned to the hotel.

A week passed before he received an invitation from Jack to join him at the Cathedral of the Holy Virgin at one P.M. The request could well have been an innocent one, since the cathedral had been a popular tourist attraction before the German invasion. It had been built in the fourteenth century. Reginald decided it was one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture he had ever seen, boasting a tower that stood four hundred feet high. In addition, the church had three paintings of Rubens, *The Descent from the Cross*, *The Elevation of the Cross*, and *The Assumption*. As he entered, he experienced a reaction that warned him there was more to the request than a simple sightseeing tour of a church.

When he arrived, there were only two other people in the cathedral, both of whom were old women deep in prayer. Reginald walked halfway down the aisle before he knelt, blessed himself, and sat down. It wasn't long before Jack joined him.

"Have you ever been here before?" Jack inquired in muted tones.

"This is the first time. It's very impressive, and those paintings of Rubens are exquisite works of art."

"My opinion of Rubens," Jack whispered, "is that his art is overblown and too lush. His women with their fleshy charms are not to my taste. But all the same, you are perfectly right about this being an example of some of his best work."

Reginald did not reply, and after a moment Jack said in a quiet, somber tone, "I have been thinking over what you said the other night and I find it extraordinary."

"Audacious and prophetic are the words I would have used," Reginald quipped with a chuckle.

"Then I also add providential. Before you arrived in Antwerp, I had made the very same suggestion to Luther which, because of his natural cautiousness and conservatism, he rejected. Your ideas following so closely on my own have caused him to reconsider. Unless I am much mistaken, he is at this

moment viewing it in a more favorable light."

"But if that is so," Reginald exclaimed, "how is it you didn't say so at once?"

Jack studied his well-manicured nails before answering. "Luther was right when he mentioned the danger such assistance to the Germans would entail. There is no small risk involved. I had to be absolutely certain of your sincerity before I compromised myself."

"I see," Reginald replied slowly. "Am I to interpret your outspokenness as a sign that I am in the clear?"

Jack smiled. "Everything you have told us has checked out, even to Luther's satisfaction."

"Good!" Reginald appeared to relax and then, studying his companion, he added, "I must confess I had not thought my speech would find success with you. Luther was my main objective. You struck me as an unlikely candidate."

"Why is that?" Jack quizzed.

Reginald shrugged. "I was sure of eventually obtaining Luther's interests through the promise of monetary gain, but I felt financial rewards would not intrigue you enough. As for power, even that angle did not seem to stir you as I hoped. Now I find you had conceived the plan before I did. What, may I ask, is your motive?"

"You are right to think I am not involved because of money or personal power." Jack's voice took on the soft, caressing quality usually reserved for lovers as he continued, "Like you and Luther, I made my fortune in America and grateful I am to that country for her generosity, but Ireland, with her soft, green hills, rocky crags, and salty air, will always be my home. For hundreds of years the Irish people have lived under the yoke of English tyranny. As a youth in Ireland I saw my father beaten to death before my eyes and my mother die of heartbreak. My cousin, only sixteen at the time, was hauled off to prison for answering a British soldier back. He died there. I had a dream at the time to go to America, where the streets were paved with gold." He smiled. "I would make my fortune there and then use it in any way I could to help my poor country."

Reginald could not help but feel compassion and sympathy for Jack's point of view, but he knew he could not let this deter him from his objective. "Since you are already on

friendly terms with the Germans, what do you suggest our first step be?"

"First we must be patient a little longer while Luther convinces himself that the rewards are greater than the risks. Afterward, I will set up a meeting with certain German representatives."

While Reginald and Jack had been conversing in low tones, two new visitors had quietly entered the church and were slowly making their way down the aisle, commenting on the art work. One of the men laughed softly and a fragment of conversation carried to where the two conspirators were sitting. The hair on the back of Reginald's neck quivered and he stiffened in alarm as the familiar voice of Count Rees-Shulberg intruded on his conversation. If the count saw him, Jack would realize he had been duped. Reginald would be arrested and shot. He could stay where he was and hope the count would, by some miracle, pass him by without recognizing him or that the man he was with, Colonel Hect, wouldn't nod in their direction, drawing the count's attention to them. Reginald felt both of these possibilities highly unlikely. His only chance lay in fleeing the church before he was recognized. Fortunately, Jack provided him with a means of escape.

"What's the matter, Max?" he asked suddenly. "You look ill."

Reginald took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. "It must be the warm weather," he murmured. "If I could get some fresh air I would feel better."

"Of course," Jack said rising to accompany him.

"I don't want to be the cause of a fuss," Reginald whispered.

"It's no trouble at all," Jack replied. They crossed the width of the pew to the left side, their backs to the approaching Germans. Reginald could feel Jack's eyes on him and hoped by the time they reached the end of the pew and were ready to walk down the aisle to the exit doors, the count would have passed them by.

But when he turned and started walking up the aisle, Jack at his side, the count sucked in his breath and began exclaiming to Colonel Hect. There was no longer any use for pretense. Reginald ran the rest of the way up the aisle.

"Max, where are you going?" Jack cried out from behind.

Reginald didn't stop to answer. Outside on the street the sun blinded him for an instant. He stood blinking, trying to make up his mind which way to go. Walking briskly but taking care not to run and attract attention, he turned the nearest corner leading off the main thoroughfare and hurried down a quiet residential street. Realizing the street was a dead end, he paused in panic, then he spied a door that had been left partially open on the other side of the street. Knowing he didn't have much time left before his enemies caught up to him, Reginald crossed over and entered the building as if he lived there, making sure to lock it behind him.

The hallway smelled of frying oil and garlic. The sound of a child whining upstairs and its mother scolding it drifted down. No one seemed to have heard him enter. Reginald went to the back of the hall and crouched down underneath the stairs, hoping the Germans wouldn't search each house on the block. It seemed as if he waited there forever, listening to the sounds of pots and pans rattling abovestairs, footsteps, and the hum of domestic conversation. Suddenly there was a commotion in the street. The sound of raised voices alerted Reginald to the fact that a search party was nearby. He held his breath and waited. The voices came nearer, and he imagined one of the soldiers peering through the glass panel at the top of the door trying to see if anyone was hiding inside. The doorknob rattled as a soldier tried it, but it held. Before he could arouse the inhabitants and search the house, something unexpected occurred to distract him. A distant buzz in the skies signaled the approach of a plane.

In the beginning of the war, pilots had acted as unarmed scouts, flying over enemy territory and bringing back military information. As they passed each other in the skies, they exchanged friendly greetings. When the war stepped up, such camaraderie abruptly changed. The pilots were armed with rifles and took shots at each other, and they had recently begun to carry bombs, which they dropped on their enemies, ostensibly to destroy military targets. More often than not, the planes flew off their course and dropped their bombs on cows, sheep, and civilians.

The men outside began to shout excitedly and Reginald realized the plane was probably English or French. Upstairs it had suddenly turned very quiet. If he tried to get out into the

open, he risked exposure. He was forced to stay where he was. The plane came closer and he could hear the hissing sound of a bomb hurtling to earth. A woman upstairs screamed. "Damn!" Reginald muttered, not having time to do more than cover his head with his arms before the explosion hit and he was buried beneath plaster, wooden beams, and brick.

As consciousness slowly returned, Reginald realized that the loud clanging in his head was not the result of a brain concussion, as he feared, but the clanging of bedpans and the rustling of surgical implements. The acrid odor was a combination of blood and disinfectant, while the disembodied voices belonged to teams of nurses and doctors. The moaning was coming from his own throat.

"Feeling beastly, are we?" a distinctly English voice inquired sympathetically.

Painfully, Reginald turned his head and looked into the face of one of the Red Cross nurses. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties with bright brown eyes and blond, bobbed hair under a white starched cap. To his dismay, he saw that he was lying in a bed in a Red Cross hospital. He glanced nervously about the room.

"Looking for Amanda Powell?" the nurse asked as she adjusted his sheet.

"How do you . . ." He paled. "You mean I talked in my sleep?"

"Quite a lot, actually. Most of it was incoherent, but it was clear you were very fond of Amanda. I don't blame you a bit. She's a smasher."

Reginald frowned. "Is she here now?"

"Do you see her?" She bent down over him and smiled.

"Amanda!"

"Yes, it's me. But you must speak quietly."

"Look . . ." Reginald began excitedly, trying to sit up and receiving a blinding pain in his head for his trouble.

"You'd best just lie still and try to get some sleep."

"You don't understand," Reginald muttered hoarsely under his breath, keeping his eye on the German soldiers guarding the entrance. "I'm in trouble with the Germans. I could be arrested at any moment."

"I'm sure no one knows you're here or they would have come for you before this," Amanda said, checking his pulse.

"They brought you in here six hours ago. In retrieving you from the rubble, your clothing was pretty well destroyed. It was a miracle you survived. Your identification was lost. It is presumed you are a Belgian glass worker whose family perished in the bombing."

"I have to get out of here," Reginald insisted stubbornly, breaking out into a cold sweat as he tried for the second time to sit up. Exhausted with the effort, he fell back.

"I'll have you know," Amanda said with mock severity, "you have bruised ribs, your left shoulder is fractured, your body is a mass of cuts, welts, and black and blue marks, and a piece of wood twelve inches long embedded itself in your right thigh. If I were you, I would stay right where I am."

"Someone is looking for me, and they won't stop looking until they find me," Reginald said between gritted teeth.

"It isn't inconceivable that among your many ills you received a concussion and loss of memory," she whispered as she handed him a glass of water that was the color of cheap rosé wine. "Do you know how to speak French?"

"Yes."

"Good. Drink this down, and from now on I shall speak only French to you, and you will answer me only in French. You won't get very far in such a weakened condition. Once you're feeling stronger, we'll discuss how to get you out of here safely."

He lay back on the pillow and was soon fast asleep.

When he awoke, it was noon of the following day. He felt stiff and hot and very sore. His wrist and thigh throbbed but he was otherwise clear-headed. It was with a sense of uneasiness that he recalled his conversation with Amanda. He managed clumsily to sit up and pour himself a glass of water. It was lukewarm, but he drank it down thirstily and was in the process of pouring another when Amanda appeared at his side.

"Sleep seems to have done you a world of good. Are you hungry, by any chance?"

"Famished," Reginald admitted.

"I shall bring you some lunch, then."

When she returned, Amanda had a tray with her and on it was a pot of coffee, a bowl of chicken broth, a hardboiled egg,

a hunk of cheese, and a slice of stale bread. "I hope you're not used to eating gourmet food, because you'll be disappointed." Placing the tray on his lap, she sat down on a chair next to the bed and poured out the coffee, which was weak.

When a doctor stopped by to examine Reginald, Amanda busied herself with other tasks. But as she wrapped fresh bandages and emptied bedpans she took the opportunity to ponder some questions. Amanda knew Reginald was in love with her. Was she in love with him? If so, why had she given him up? Now that she had left her husband and her mother-in-law, wasn't she free to do as she chose?

Over the next two days, Reginald chafed at his forced inactivity and worried over his vulnerability, but he had to admit he was safer in the hospital than walking the streets. The Germans questioned him once, but since he claimed amnesia, they left him alone. When he was healed, they assured him, he would be sent to Germany to work in a munitions plant. All his needs would be taken care of by Germany. This worried him, but Amanda assured him a plan was under way that would get him in touch with a Belgian underground movement, which would smuggle him out of the country. Amanda also brought the unwelcome news that day that the Germans were looking for an American by the name of Max Gunther who was considered a very dangerous criminal. Reginald admitted this had been his alias and cautioned her to beware of a man named Jack Fitzroy.

"You've got your wish at last," Amanda murmured one evening as she brought him his supper. "You'd best leave tonight. Tomorrow morning there is to be an inspection by Colonel Hect."

"I've been thinking it over, and I don't want to endanger any of the nurses or doctors, so I shall manage my escape on my own."

"Don't be a fool," Amanda said scornfully. "You couldn't possibly succeed, not in your condition. The soldiers are combing the area for you. Besides, we've got it all worked out, Emily Peters and I. She's the head of it, really. It's been tried before with variations and there were never any complications."

"What do I do?" Reginald asked gratefully.

"We're going to move you to a cot nearer the back. You lay in your bed and behave yourself until about three P.M. It's pretty dead around here about then. One of the patients and I will create a fracas that will require the intervention of the guards. While we're thus engaged, you will crawl out of the bed and make your way to the area behind the screen, where the seriously ill are laid out. An empty cot will be set up for you. You will then do your best imitation of a corpse. Emily will be making her rounds. She'll examine you and call for my aid while she tries unsuccessfully to revive you. Once she pronounces you dead, she will then request the guards to carry you out to the burial yard."

"What if the guard decides to check up on Emily's prognosis?"

"That's the risky part," Amanda admitted, "but so far nothing like that has ever happened."

"How do I manage not to get buried?"

"They never bury anyone until the lights are out. By that time you will be safe and sound. Bodies that aren't claimed have red tags attached to them. The Germans take them for experimental purposes. They don't want a bad press, so it's all hush-hush. A wagon that looks like theirs will pull up and whisk you away, only it won't be to their filthy labs but to the house of a member of the underground, who will make sure you get out of the country safely."

"What happens when they finally realize I've escaped?"

"Patients often try to escape from the hospital. They expect that. That's why they've posted guards at the doors. No one can prove a thing. If anyone is punished it will be their own men."

"Thank you, Amanda," Reginald said, squeezing her hand.

"When will I see you again?"

"I don't know how long I will be here," she said quietly.

"Come here, Amanda," he said, still gripping her hand. She leaned over as if to hear what he was saying, and they kissed. But she pulled away quickly, fearful that someone might see them.

"You can reach me at the Ritz in London," he whispered. Her eyes filled with tears, and a sob gripped her throat. "Be careful. You must be careful," she said. Then she hurried away.

Amid a fresh crop of wounded British and French soldiers, Reginald was casually removed to a bed at the back at eight o'clock that evening. He lay there quietly, waiting for the designated hour, and tried to get a little sleep but was too tense. At five minutes to three, one of the patients began muttering and started screaming and trying to rip the tube from his arm. Amanda rushed over to quiet him down, but he became more violent and struck her. The guards left their posts and began wrestling him to the bed.

Reginald slipped off his cot and went behind the screen. This was the first time he had been on his feet and he felt dizzy. Six men were lying on cots behind the screen. All of them were unconscious. Their breathing was shallow and some of them groaned in their sleep. Just as Amanda had promised, he spied an empty cot and immediately limped over and lay down on it. His head was pounding and his thigh felt like it was on fire, but he closed his eyes and concentrated on slowing his breathing. It seemed like an eternity but was probably not much more than two or three minutes before Emily entered the room. He could hear her moving about checking the other patients and making notes on their charts. In case one of the guards had accompanied her, he didn't dare open his eyes. Emily, who smelled strongly of disinfectant, stopped by his bed. She felt his pulse, made an exclamation, and drew one of his eyelids back. Then she leaned over him as though she were listening for his heartbeat.

"Think dead," she whispered before rushing out into the open area. "I need some help, nurse."

Amanda rushed into the room, and one of the guards looked in on the scene from a discreet distance. Amanda held a bottle of smelling salts under his nose, but since water had been substituted for ammonia, he didn't have to worry he would choke on the fumes. Nurse Emily pounded on his chest and tried mouth to mouth resuscitation, but after working on him for several minutes, she took a deep breath and placed the sheet over his head.

"It's no use. He's gone." She checked her watch. "How is it out there, nurse?" she asked, addressing Amanda.

"Pretty quiet, ma'am."

"I'll take over now. You can get some sleep. Nurse Andrews and Doctor Stuart will be coming on in a few minutes."

"Yes ma'am," Amanda replied meekly.

"Corporal," Emily said crisply as she went by the guard, "I'd appreciate it if you and your friend get someone to replace you for a moment so you can remove Private Dobbs here to the yard."

The German officer hesitated. It wasn't his responsibility, but Emily's brisk, efficient manner, combined with her experience in giving orders and expecting them to be obeyed, persuaded him.

The experience of being roughly tossed about on a stretcher carried by two men who presumed he was dead and no longer had any sensation, and then thrown on a pile of rotting corpses that had been lying exposed for a couple of hours in the heat of summer would not easily be forgotten. To make matters even more unpleasant, Reginald's wounded leg struck a stone step when they emptied the stretcher and he endured agonies of torment as the wound opened and began to bleed anew. Unless he wanted to be discovered, he was forced to lie where they had thrown him without moving a muscle or permitting a moan of pain to escape his lips and to pray that they didn't notice the bleeding.

To his dismay, the guards did not immediately return to their posts. Having succeeded in obtaining temporary replacements, they decided to take advantage of it. They stood well away from the offending odor and lit up cigarettes. Damn, Reginald thought, mentally cursing them and trying not to flinch. Pretty soon he broke out in a cold sweat as he fought against pain and being sick from the stench. The guards finally finished their cigarettes and went back inside. He risked opening his eyes. As far as he could tell from where he lay, he was alone, but he couldn't risk movement of any kind. Just as he was thinking he couldn't stay in this position any longer, a black van pulled up nearby. Reginald closed his eyes and waited. Two men got out and began removing the corpses.

"What a stinking job," one said in Prussian.

"I would rather be at the front," the other one agreed loudly. "At least you see some action and you have a chance to prove yourself. There's no honor in conveying carrion."

"It's not something you look forward to telling your children about," the first one agreed.

What if there had been some mistake, Reginald thought uneasily. What if these men were the real thing? They certainly sounded like it. He was reassured when they picked him up and laid him with on the stretcher with uncalled-for gentleness, taking care not to place him too near the other bodies. When they had finished, they drove off. Only then did Reginald dare move, but by this time he couldn't find a comfortable position. His thigh was drenched in blood and he felt hot with fever. The van drove on for about half an hour before stopping. Reginald was still unsure of what to expect, so he kept still with his eyes closed.

"Are you all right, monsieur?" one of the men asked in faulty English as he climbed into the van. "We must take you to another vehicle."

Reginald groaned. "Thank God that's over."

The ordeal might be over for Reginald, but it was only just beginning for Amanda and Emily. Colonel Hect, accompanied by three other men, arrived at dawn, four hours ahead of schedule. They made the rounds of inspection and commented favorably on the cleanliness and orderliness of the hospital, but when informed that one of the patients had escaped in the night, their attitude drastically altered. No longer were they friendly or even polite.

"This is disgraceful," Colonel Hect snapped. "My men and I intend to conduct a thorough investigation. I want to examine the records of the man who escaped, and I shall want to interview the staff who were on the floor last night in fifteen minutes precisely." He barked these orders to a nervous Doctor Stuart and the staff who had replaced Emily and Amanda.

On being informed of the situation, the two nurses dressed hastily while a guard waited outside to conduct them to Colonel Hect's office. They had little time to concur on an alibi as they put on their uniforms, but Emily took the opportunity to impress upon Amanda a strict warning.

"No matter what happens," she whispered, "you musn't admit to doing anything wrong. They'll try to trick you so be on your guard."

"I will." Amanda was frightened but tried not to show it as she walked into the colonel's office.

Colonel Hect was an ambitious man who had come up

through the ranks. The war was looked on as a stepping stone to greater glory. From wars were born heroes who were not held back by their modest beginnings. It was therefore embarrassing to be informed by General Brandenburg that the Red Cross hospital under his jurisdiction had a suspiciously high percentage of enemy patients escape. It was even more galling to discover on his arrival at the hospital that another one had just successfully joined their ranks. Something must be done about it. An example must be made of the person or persons responsible, regardless of their sex.

It was with unusual harshness that he questioned the women, particularly Nurse Peters. To his disappointment, under his interrogation she remained polite and calm. Nurse Powell was intimidated by his threats and shouts and came near to tears on several occasions, but even she remained firm in protesting her innocence and that of Nurse Peters. Colonel Hect was certain they had a hand in the man's escape or at least knew a great deal more about it than they let on, but he wanted proof or a confession of guilt.

After studying the missing man's admission records, a dreadful suspicion began to take shape in his mind. An American spy who had successfully eluded capture had last been seen in the vicinity where this man was found. If his suspicions were correct, the missing amnesiac was an American spy. The escape of a Belgian glass worker was a mere trifle in comparison with the escape of an American spy. He began to sweat as he recalled Count Rees-Shulberg's personal animosity toward the American. If the count caught wind of what had become of the spy, he would accuse his subordinate of being lax and try to ruin him. The safest course was to expose the person responsible and punish him or her severely so any future rescuers would be too terrified of repercussions to involve themselves in another escape attempt. If he resolved the whole affair before anyone else stumbled on the fact that the missing Belgian worker might possibly have been a notorious American spy, he would be safe.

He summoned the entire hospital staff to his office, including the patient who had created the disturbance that had so effectively removed the guards from their posts. The patient, no more than eighteen, had had an amputation for gangrene of his right foot, and he could well have been delirious

as he had claimed. He certainly looked far from well as he hobbled in on crutches. With his career in jeopardy, Colonel Hect was not a merciful man.

"I do not believe your story," he snapped at the boy. "You are a liar. You were not delirious as you claimed. You were putting on an act to distract my guards so a patient could escape."

"No sir," the boy protested.

"Silence!" Colonel Hect screamed, lashing him across the face with his black riding crop. "You will only speak when you are addressed."

"I protest such brutal treatment," Nurse Peters said angrily. "This man is a patient who has just had a serious operation. Under the international code of war . . ."

"It is clear to me that there is a conspiracy under foot," Colonel Hect interrupted grimly, "and I intend to get at the truth. Those who refuse to cooperate will suffer the consequences."

"You can't," Amanda objected, appalled. "It's against all the rules of honorable warfare to torture wounded prisoners of war in a Red Cross hospital."

"Let me remind you," Colonel Hect said coldly, "that this hospital is in German occupied territory and that at least one of you if not all of you have conspired to help an enemy escape."

"The patient was a Belgian civilian," Emily said coolly, "not a professional soldier or a terrorist."

Colonel Hect turned his glacial stare upon her. "That is so," he said softly. "He was a simple glass worker whose country we now occupy and who was conscripted for service in Germany. If you have helped him escape, you are no longer protected by the Red Cross, which I am sure I do not need to remind you is a neutral organization. Unless someone speaks up at once, I will be forced to send this boy to be interrogated further by one of my men who is more skilled than I in this department."

"He is in a weakened condition," Emily pleaded, "and if he is subjected to torture he will surely collapse. He's feverish now. He could die under brutal treatment."

"I shall have to take that chance. You leave me no recourse."

"Such disgraceful, inhuman conduct will be reported to the international committee," Emily said shocked.

Colonel Hect shrugged. "That is your prerogative. But let me warn you, ladies, that if the boy dies, it will be on your conscience. And should he die without revealing the information we seek, we will begin interrogating the two of you starting with Nurse Powell."

"I never thought you'd stoop so low as to torture women," Private Hawkins muttered as he wiped a smear of blood from his lip, where the riding crop had struck.

"You are wrong," Colonel Hect said sharply. Shifting into German, he barked out, "Corporal, take the prisoner to the car and transport him to my office, where you will hand him over to Sergeant Gomber for interrogation."

The corporal saluted, placed a hand on Private Hawkins's shoulder. Amanda and Emily had understood the command. Amanda stared in horrified disbelief while Emily stood up, her shoulders held back, her hands at her sides. Her cheeks were flushed with anger. A straggling strand of brown hair had escaped its confinement from a bun at the nape of her neck, and she carefully pushed it back into place.

"There is no point in proceeding any further," she said, her voice disdainful. "I alone am responsible for the patient's escape. Nurse Powell and Private Hawkins were entirely ignorant of the situation."

"No, you mustn't believe her," Amanda said desperately. "She's hysterical. She doesn't know what she's saying."

"It was me," Private Hawkins insisted. "I diverted the guards like you said, so the prisoner could escape. She had nothing to do with it."

"There's no need for heroics," Emily said severely. "I think the colonel knows better than to believe such silliness. I took advantage of Private Hawkins's very real delirium and helped the patient to one of the other rooms, where I proceeded to examine him and pronounce him dead. I then ordered the guards to place him in the burial yard, where he managed to escape."

Colonel Hect frowned. The records showed that the patient was hurt too badly to have made good his escape on his own. He would have liked to learn the identity of the person responsible for aiding and abetting him. Most likely, he mused,

it would turn out to be a Belgian underground fighter. "Enough," he said tersely, putting an end to the clammering of Amanda and Private Hawkins by dismissing them. "I wish to speak to Nurse Peters alone."

Once the door was closed he declared, "You have committed treasonous acts in a time of war. By helping an enemy escape, you deliberately and willfully worked against the organization you represent. You cannot, therefore, expect to receive protection from that source."

"I understand," Emily said with dignity.

"If you were a man, you would be judged a spy, taken out, and shot by a firing squad. Because you are a woman I cannot excuse your malicious conduct nor find it in my heart to show you any mercy by altering the sentence to a lighter one."

Emily paled but said nothing.

"You will, however, be given an hour to confess your sins and make your peace with a religious representative of your faith before the sentence is carried out."

When Amanda heard the news, she burst into tears, but there was nothing she nor anyone else could do to save Emily. To their horror, the entire hospital staff was required to watch the execution.

An hour after signing a confession implicating herself, Emily was marched out to the same grisly yard where Reginald had lain. An area was cleared for her to stand and her hands were tied behind her back. She was offered a blindfold, which she refused. Colonel Hect asked her if she wished to make a last statement but she shook her head. Instead, she entrusted to the Anglican minister a letter to her only sister in Essex.

Colonel Hect took the opportunity to address those present. "Remember that you are permitted to practice your healing arts in occupied territory by the sufferance of the German government. In return, you are not to betray the trust placed in you by intriguing with an enemy delivered into your care. It is with deep regret," he said, raising his voice over the sobs of several hospital personnel, "that I am forced to take such harsh measures against one of your people and a member of the female sex. Nurse Peters brought the calamity on herself by interfering in an area that should have held no interest for her. Do not make the same mistake yourselves," he warned sharply.

At the end of this speech he gave the order to the firing squad.

"Ready . . . aim . . . fire!"

Amanda's willpower gave way at last and she fainted.

Two weeks later Amanda quietly made her way out of Belgium and returned to England. She was devastated by the tragic death of Emily Peters. In the midst of her sorrow and anger she realized that she must protect the growing life inside her from the wanton ravages of war. She would have her child in the secure, familiar surroundings of England.

Chapter Ten

[1917]

"OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR" was no longer flippantly on the lips of anyone. The Allies had not proved they could conquer Germany in ninety days, but neither had Germany crushed the Allies. The war had turned into a stalemate that exhausted the resources and decimated the male population. Worst of all, it wasn't over. As the Christmas holidays approached, few British subjects found anything to rejoice about.

Russia was beset by strikes and revolutions. The czar abdicated on March 15 and the Bolsheviks stormed the Winter Palace, taking the czar and his family prisoner. The western front was besieged by internal conflict. The French army, after three long years and intolerable conditions, had come close to mutiny. Henri Philippe Pétain, the new commander in chief of the French army had saved the day by promising much needed reforms and rest leaves. The British army experienced similar problems in Etaples. The Germans continued to send Monsters of the Purple Twilight to drop bombs. Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron of Germany, with his Flying Circus, was becoming a legend by scoring victory after victory against French and British pilots. The Easter Rebellion had broken out in Ireland the previous year but was quickly squashed. Sir Roger Casement was found guilty of plotting with Germany and was hanged in August at the Tower of London.

Amanda sat by the living room window of her mother-in-law's house. She watched her two-year-old daughter, Rosalind, laying on the rug and smiled. It was snowing, and huge white flakes drifted past the window, creating a thick carpet of

pure, virgin snow on the streets.

"She has shoes on," Eugenia said critically. "She'll dirty the material or rip it."

"It's time for her nap anyway." Amanda picked her daughter up and carried her off to bed. She marveled once again at her mother-in-law's response to her only grandchild. Eugenia was not the doting grandmother she had envisioned. The fear that she would spoil Rosalind and try to overrule Amanda's decisions as to how the child should be raised proved groundless. She ignored Rosalind except when she cried. She would then express considerable irritation at the disturbance. Her affection and preference had not swerved from Michael to his daughter. Amanda often wondered if Eugenia would have reacted differently if Rosalind had been a boy, but she doubted this. Perhaps the real reason was that she resented Amanda's ability to give Michael something she couldn't. If that was the case, it was ironic, she thought with a sigh as she tucked Rosalind in, overruling her daughter's insistence on staying up. Michael had not expressed the excitement and joy she hoped he would when informed he was to be a father. On his infrequent visits home he was always kind to the child. He never complained when she was cranky and he usually brought her a gift, but if Amanda didn't urge him to include her in his plans or play with her, he wouldn't do it on his own. More often than not, he forgot to mention her in his letters home.

Michael was thrilled to be a member of the Royal Flying Corps, or a Quirk, as they were dubbed. He had distinguished himself on numerous occasions with great courage and skill in shooting down enemy aircraft. Having successfully eliminated sixty German planes, he was considered an ace, and his name was revered or feared accordingly by the British, French, German, and American pilots. The war had produced a new kind of hero, and Michael had joined their ranks.

Once the war was over, provided he was still alive, Amanda feared the readjustment from hero to man in the street settling down to a routine job would be too great. If Michael returned to his former pattern of quitting a succession of jobs and depending on his mother to support them, she knew she would have to take some drastic action. For now she would wait. When Rosalind's deep breathing indicated she was fast asleep, Amanda got up and quietly went back downstairs.

The butler met her at the door to the parlor. "Mrs. Powell

said to inform you when you came down that she has gone to visit the vicar."

"Did she say when she would be back?" Amanda asked, relieved.

"No, madam." Brice liked Amanda and sympathized with her wish to be alone for as long as possible.

"Very well. You may send in the tea in half an hour if my mother-in-law isn't back yet."

Returning to the parlor, Amanda curled up in the window seat, her hands idle. She could not have done that if Eugenia had been present. Her mother-in-law despised idleness and would have severely criticized her for not knitting woolen scarves or darning socks for the war effort. She pressed her face against the glass pane and felt the cold against her cheek. Her breath fogged up the window and she drew a picture of a snowman on the glass. The rakish angle of his cap suddenly reminded her of Sally and instantly she felt guilty. She hadn't answered Sally's invitation to join her and Cecil for the holidays at their Yorkshire estate.

When she had first returned she told her friend how she had met Reginald at the hospital, how Emily Peters was executed for helping him escape, and how she had returned lovesick for a man she thought she would never see again and distraught over her friend's sacrifice. But she could not bring herself to tell Sally that her daughter was Reginald's and not Michael's.

I can't imagine why you gave him up," Sally said.

"You give the affair too much importance," Amanda said, deliberately keeping her voice light. "We were both married and there was no question of a future. It was just one of those things," she said lamely.

"Um!" Sally picked up one of Eugenia's china cats. Under the guise of admiring it she said blandly, "How is Michael, by the by?"

"He's very happy in the Royal Flying Corps," Amanda said dryly, knowing quite well what her friend meant but having no wish to oblige her.

Sally carefully replaced the grinning cat and turned her penetrating gaze upon Amanda. "I know it's none of my business, but all the same, I hate to see two people who belong together stay apart."

"Don't be absurd," Amanda said angrily. "You don't know Reginald at all and . . ."

"Have you ever thought," Sally interrupted ruthlessly, "that after the war Reginald might take it into his head to pay a return trip to London? There's the possibility of your running into each other accidentally. Wouldn't you be the least bit excited to see him? All you have to do is contact him through the Ritz. You said that's what he asked you to do."

"You're being utterly ridiculous," Amanda said, unaware of the note of regret that had crept into her voice.

"Well for what it's worth," Sally said, standing up, "I don't believe for an instant that you aren't still madly in love with him. My advice is, if you do happen to bump into each other at some future time and place, I hope you won't be such idiots as to act as if it was all a great bore."

"Sally . . ." Amanda pleaded desperately.

"I never thought Michael was right for you. I told you that before," Brushing scone crumbs off her skirt, she took an envelope out of her purse and handed it to Amanda. "This is for Rosalind. She's a darling child. I'm sorry we couldn't be there for the christening. This is a little something from Cecil and me, and if you put up a fuss I shall scream."

"I shan't put up a fuss," Amanda said with a smile, relieved she was going. "And be sure to thank Cecil for me."

"I shall and don't be such a silly goose as to imagine I will ever mention Reginald's name again. I've had my say and that's the end of it. Nor will I be such a poor friend as to gossip about it. On occasion, I've been known to hold my tongue. It's one of my more adorable traits."

How he must hate me, Amanda thought unhappily as she gazed out the window. It was warm in the room and very still. If she let herself dwell on Reginald and what might have been instead of what was, she would be living in a fantasy world as unsound as anything Michael had ever postulated.

The muffled sounds of someone at the front door intruded on her thoughts, but she imagined it must be Eugenia returning. She knew her mother-in-law would be displeased if she came in and saw her curled up half asleep in the window seat, but for once Amanda didn't care. She would stay where she was. The door to the parlor opened and someone stood looking in. She could sense the person was watching her and decided if it was Eugenia she would have spoken by now. Opening her eyes she gave a faint start of surprise to see Michael,

looking rumpled and standing in the doorway gazing at her uncertainly.

"What is it? What's happened?" She asked, alarmed, as he limped over and kissed her lightly on the forehead. He reeked of alcohol. That in itself was unusual. Michael never drank more than a glass of wine with supper.

"I'm on leave for a few hours. Thought I'd come by and see you and Mother," he said, slurring his words.

"You're hurt. What happened?" she asked.

"The Huns took a few shots at me, but it's nothing serious." Running a hand through his hair, he sat down on a chair next to Amanda. "I've had a rotten day. I feel all fagged out."

"Shall I ring for Brice to get you anything? How about some coffee or . . ."

"No," he said, frowning and waving a hand. "I need some sleep. Haven't slept in days."

"You look all in," Amanda concurred in a concerned voice as she eyed his grayish complexion and the dark smudges under his eyes.

"I'm not feeling all that steady," he admitted as he stood up, weaving a bit. "I had a few with some of the other chaps before I left."

"I can see that," Amanda said dryly. "If you put your arm around my shoulders for support, I'll help you up to bed."

"Good idea. Don't know how much longer I'll hold out."

As they slowly made their way up to his bedroom, Michael stopped halfway up the stairs and inquired in a conspiratorial voice, "Is Mother here?"

"No, she's at the vicar's. I don't know when she'll be back." Amanda wondered if he was nervous about Eugenia seeing him in a drunken state. She abhorred spirits of any kind.

"That's all right then," Michael said satisfied. "I never realized before how many stairs there are," he grumbled as they continued the ascent. "It seems endless."

"We're almost there, but if you'd rather I called Brice . . ."

"No," he said firmly, pressing her closer. "Just you."

"How long shall I let you sleep?" Amanda asked as he staggered into the room. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he began removing his boots with difficulty. She took over the task.

"Four hours. No more. I want to take a bath and eat a de-

cent meal before shoving off again." He paused in the middle of unbuttoning his shirt and said in a strained voice, "We're all dying off, you know. The whole lot of us. One by one we go up in flames. My turn nearly came yesterday. It was only a miracle the engine held out long enough for me to execute a crash landing. As soon as I crawled out of the wreckage and scrambled a few feet, the blasted thing exploded. It singed my hair." He sounded indignant.

"You told me you enjoyed the danger," Amanda said as she removed his pants and shirt and made him lie back. "You said it would be worse if you were a soldier."

"I suppose so," Michael muttered gloomily. "Still, flying is no picnic anymore. Albert Ball is dead. Someday even the Red Baron will get his."

"If you feel that way about it, why don't you get out of the Flying Corps. Put in for a transfer to the regular army or navy?"

"You knew Howard Beaton, good old Howie," Michael said, ignoring her suggestion. "He was always such a puny runt, but he chalked up forty-eight German planes. He died this morning. Just as it looked as if he were going to be home free, his plane caught fire and he jumped. The doctor said all his bones were broken. Nasty way to go."

Covering Michael with a warm quilt, Amanda said gently, "Wars are frightful. If you're afraid, it's perfectly understandable. No one wants to die."

"That's the odd part. I'm not really scared. I guess everyone thinks they won't die, the other fellow will. It's just that in the corps you get to know the men by their first names. Everyone knows everybody else. We come from all walks of life. Howie had a broad Suffolk accent you could barely understand. We're brothers. We welcome the new recruits and then watch them die off like flies. Even the best go under eventually."

"I'm sorry about Howard," Amanda said, holding his hand. "I know how much you liked him."

"He had consumption, you know. Said he didn't want to die by inches. He wanted a quick death. I guess he got his wish," Michael added bitterly.

"I'm sorry. If only there was something I could say that wouldn't sound trite."

Michael pressed her hand. "I was thinking about you today, Mandy."

"Were you, dearest?"

"Albert Ball's gone. Howie's gone. Half the men who joined up with me are in their graves. I could be next."

"Michael!"

"I'm not being superstitious or anything. I just felt you ought to know I know, in case the bloody Huns have my name on one of their filthy bullets."

"Know what?" Amanda asked uneasily.

"That I'm aware Rosalind isn't my daughter."

Amanda stared.

"I was afraid you would leave me for the other chap and I was wild with jealousy. I couldn't stand it if you left me, Mandy. When you said we were going to have a child, I knew you weren't planning on running out or you would have said so. In case I get killed I want you to know that I forgive you. There's no need to feel guilty about it."

"How did you know?" Amanda asked faintly, unaware of the figure hovering outside the door.

"I can't have children of my own. The doctors all told me it was hopeless. I didn't mind because I didn't particularly want a child, but I knew how much you did. When you told me you were pregnant, I acted as if she were mine. I was afraid if you were aware I knew the truth, you'd feel so guilty about it you'd leave."

"Is that why you ignore her half the time?"

"I didn't realize I was behaving badly toward the little thing. I didn't mean to. It has nothing to do with her being somebody else's. I'm afraid I wasn't cut out to be a father. I'd treat my own daughter the same way. Sorry."

"How long have you known?" Amanda asked, dazed at this sudden revelation.

"When I was twenty-one I got the measles. The doctor warned me at the time I might be sterile."

"You mean you knew before we were married and you didn't tell me?"

"Don't be mad. I wasn't absolutely positive, and I thought you wouldn't mind it being just the two of us. You and me, Mandy. Just you and me." His words fell off as he drifted into a sound sleep.

Dropping his hand, Amanda stood up. She was touched by his need for her and furious at his selfishness. "How could you be so unfair?" she whispered fiercely. Michael was already snoring. Storming out of the room, she ran down the hall to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Eugenia slipped out of the shadows and stood trembling with outrage and indignation. The look of malevolence that twisted her harsh, unattractive features into a mask of blind hatred would have given Amanda pause if she had been a witness to it. The thought of this woman betraying her son incensed Eugenia. For years she had tried to hide the resentment and fury she felt toward her upstart daughter-in-law behind a mask of benevolence. Now her true feelings threatened to consume her. She longed to have Amanda and that wretched child thrown out of the house with only the clothes on their backs. Bitterly, she knew such vengeance eluded her, at least for now. Michael was too tender-hearted for his own good. In spite of everything, Eugenia was sure he would defend them, and very likely she would only succeed in alienating him.

Quietly entering Michael's room, she knelt beside his bed. Gradually the rage dissipated and her features softened. She gently touched his golden hair. He muttered in his sleep.

"Never mind, my love," she whispered caressingly. "She took you from me and cruelly deceived you, but one day she shall pay for it. I promise you that. She shall pay."

Chapter Eleven

[November 1918]

" 'THE GERMANS ARE so demoralized by the war that they are revolting all over Germany,' " Amanda read excitedly at breakfast one morning. " 'It's only a question of time before the delegates unconditionally surrender and peace is declared.' "

"No doubt you will be seeing my son soon enough." Eugenia's voice had a hard edge to it.

Amanda put the paper down and glanced at her mother-in-law uneasily. Over the past several months she had become aware of a disturbing tendency in Eugenia to sudden vitriolic attacks over trifles, gloomy silences that lasted for several days, and mysterious absences from home without explanation. These strange spells were alternated by bouts of generosity toward her and Rosalind and gay, superficial chatter that was painful as well as awkward to deal with, since she knew quite well such fits of friendliness were not based on any real desire to improve their relationship. Why Eugenia indulged in such pitiful displays she had no idea. The fear that her mother-in-law was close to a nervous collapse made her pray that much harder for the war to end and Michael to return safely.

One incident in particular had alarmed her. About three weeks earlier, Amanda had discovered Eugenia standing in Rosalind's room looking down at the child, who was taking a nap. The look on Eugenia's face as she gazed down at the sleeping child was full of malice and spite. Leaning over the crib, she reached out a hand and Amanda instinctively stepped into the room and addressed her in an unsteady voice.

"Mother, I've been looking all over for you. The housekeeping accounts have to be tallied up and gone over."

Eugenia gently pulled the tossed covers over Rosalind before turning toward Amanda, the wild look gone.

"Michael's return will be a great relief to us all," Amanda said.

Sipping her tea, Eugenia replied coldly, "I shall be out all afternoon. If Hattie Mansfield asks after me, you can tell her you don't expect me back much before four."

"Would you care for some company?" Amanda asked, curious as to Eugenia's destination.

"That wouldn't be wise," she said with an enigmatic smile.

"Not wise?" Amanda inquired, puzzled.

"You would be bored. I have to see my lawyer. He wants me to sign some papers."

Amanda did not believe this, but she had no proof and in any case Eugenia's affairs, mysterious or not, were none of her business. She was about to continue with her reading when there was a knock on the dining room door. Brice entered, bearing a telegram on a silver dish. "This just arrived, madam."

"Thank you, Brice," Amanda said lightly, trying not to show her anxiety. Like most people who receive telegrams during war, she experienced an attack of acute fright, wondering if it contained bad news. As she hesitated she could feel Eugenia's cold eyes on her.

"Are you going to open it or just keep staring at it?" she asked sarcastically.

Opening the telegram, Amanda read the dreadful news.

WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR HUSBAND,
MICHAEL PHILIP POWELL, HEROICALLY DIED IN ACTION ON
THIS...

"What does it say? Is it about Michael?" Eugenia demanded.

Shocked, Amanda passed it to her.

Eugenia read it through without murmuring a word. The telegram slipped from her hands and silently fell to the carpet. Her face had gradually turned into a bloodless mask, her lips bluish and her breathing harsh. She stared in front of her without seeing, her eyes huge pools of grief and anguish, while

her plump hands gripped the edge of the table so tightly the knuckles were white.

Compassion and a shared sense of loss made Amanda reach out to cover Eugenia's trembling hand only to have her mother-in-law snatch it away as though she were burned. "Don't touch me," she hissed, glaring at Amanda. Rising abruptly, she knocked over the chair in her haste to escape.

It was left to Amanda to pick up the telegram and reread it in order to discover when the body would be arriving at Victoria Station. Michael's death was tragic, coming at a time when the armistice was about to be declared. Later, in the privacy of her own room, she would feel remorse and weep. But she was a realist and knew Michael's death would not cause her the sense of utter desolation it aroused in his mother. She had loved Michael once but never in the blind, all-consuming manner Eugenia had. Thoughts of the future were already occupying her mind. It was no longer feasible to live on the bounty of her mother-in-law, even if that were a remote possibility. Feeling guilty for allowing such materialistic concerns to influence her at such a time, she made a silent vow not to bother with them until after the funeral had been arranged.

Great would have been Amanda's surprise if she had learned her mother-in-law, whom she assumed was upstairs prostrated with misery, had already left the house to keep her appointment. Moreover, her surprise would have turned to amazement if she had seen the peculiar person Eugenia had rushed off to meet.

Archie Gluck, alias Archie the Lip, so named because he had the ability to talk his way out of tight situations, stood a little over five feet tall. He had a crop of red hair, yellowish eyes with transparent eyelashes, and a gray, sickly pallor his sister insisted he had possessed even as a child. Growing up in the slums of London, Archie received a thorough education in the criminal arts. His relatives and friends were thieves, fences, prostitutes, pimps, and murderers. Early in his career, he had had the good fortune to have been taken on by Bill Lambert himself, who, until he was stabbed by a jealous mistress, was London's leading fence. Archie was something of a hero to the denizens of the underworld. Throughout his entire career he had never been in jail, a feat no one else at his level of success could claim. His downfall was his love of gambling,

which prevented him from retiring from his profession with a tidy sum and investing in legitimate enterprises like a gentleman. In his long career Archie had lent his hand to many different capers, including embezzlement, fraud, robbery, counterfeiting and cock fighting. He was superstitious, and if he flipped a coin and turned a job down, no one laughed. Such was his reputation that other members of the band would generally back out too, feeling if it was too risky for Archie it was too risky for them. His friends and acquaintances genuinely liked the little man. It was believed, and not without reason, that he would never rat on anybody, so they all trusted him and went out of their way to protect him. There were some jobs Archie wouldn't touch on general principles, prostitution and murder among them.

Archie had agreed to meet Eugenia Powell in Kensington Park at an out-of-the-way bench under a tree. It was bitter cold and the park was practically deserted, which was why he had chosen it for a rendezvous. He was chewing on a toothpick debating the pros and cons of the job she had offered him. It belonged in the class of work he usually didn't handle, but the money was good. It would pull him out of the hole he had fallen into and even set him up with a nice stash for a few years. Money wasn't the only consideration that influenced Archie into taking on a job. In this case, it so happened fate had played into his hands, and he had a ready-made solution on hand for what the old wot suggested. He had no intention of revealing his plans to her. His queer yellowish eyes looked her over dispassionately. She was not only cracked, he decided, but mean, very mean.

"Are you sure you want to go through with it?" he asked once more just for good measure.

"I told you so, didn't I?" Eugenia was annoyed. "If you don't want to do it, I'll find someone else."

Archie bit down on the wooden toothpick. He didn't like to be threatened. Under ordinary circumstances he would have told her to stuff it. He could always find work. The nature of the job stirred his conscience, however, and struck a sentimental chord. If he told her to shove off, she might end up with the sort of callous bloke who wouldn't balk at carrying out her instructions, and he didn't much care to see that happen. Removing the toothpick, he said, "I'll do it, but you take all the risks. And if you change your mind later on, it's too late."

"I won't change my mind," Eugenia said grimly, her breath coming out like steam in the cold air.

"When is it, then?"

"Three days from now. 'I'll meet you here at eleven fifteen and I'll bring the money in a shoebox.'"

"If the police get suspicious, you're on your own," Archie said, standing up and brushing himself off. He was very particular about his clothes.

"You needn't worry about them," she said disdainfully. "Make sure you follow my instructions to the letter," she added, putting a gloved hand on his arm as if willing him to obey.

He stepped out of her reach. He didn't like to be touched, especially by women with minds like hers. "I know my job and I'll be here on time. If you're late, I'll be gone and you won't find me again."

Before Eugenia could reply, he moved off. She waited a few moments, breathing heavily, before she walked slowly away in the opposite direction.

Believing her mother-in-law was too upset to take an active part in the funeral arrangements, Amanda had been startled when Eugenia insisted upon assuming full responsibility. She didn't object but was convinced a delayed reaction had set in and that sooner or later Eugenia's strength and fortitude would give out. She was, therefore, not unduly surprised when the day of the funeral arrived and she discovered Eugenia in bed, tearfully insisting she was incapable of accompanying her to the service and the burial. After an unsuccessful attempt at coaxing her to attend at least the church service, Amanda gave in and prepared to depart alone. She was halfway to the door when Eugenia made a request that took her aback and caused her some uneasiness.

"The servants will be at the funeral, and since I gave them the day off," she sighed, "I shall be here all alone. If only my granddaughter could stay with me to keep me company."

"Well," Amanda began hesitantly, noting that this was the first time Eugenia had referred to Rosalind as her grandchild, "I planned on taking her with me."

"She's still a baby," Eugenia sniffed. "She would be better off at home, but if you don't wish her to be in my company . . ." she said in a grievous tone, her voice trembling.

"Of course she can stay," Amanda relented, kindness and compassion overcoming any lingering reservations.

When she was certain everyone had left the house, Eugenia climbed out of bed and hastily dressed. On her way out, she stopped at the closet and took out a shoe box that was wrapped in plain brown paper and tied with string.

Rosalind had been awake for some time, playing with her toys, and she looked up eagerly, a trusting smile on her face as her grandmother entered. "Are we going out?" she inquired, reaching up her hands.

"Yes. We're going out," Eugenia said coldly. She shoved Rosalind's arms into her coat without taking care not to hurt her, and the child began to cry.

"Behave yourself, you little brat," Eugenia snapped, slapping her, which only succeeded in turning Rosalind's wails into shrieking sobs.

By the time Eugenia arrived in Kensington Park, Rosalind's screams had died down to occasional sniffs of reproach. Dumping the child on the bench, she handed the parcel to Archie.

"It's all there. You can count it if you like," she gasped, having a hard time catching her breath. The twenty-minute walk pulling a squirming, hysterical child and carrying a box of money had exhausted her. Feeling a sharp pain under her breast, she sat down. Rosalind stared at Archie with fascination. He winked and handed her a piece of candy.

"I won't count it now," he told Eugenia mildly. "Time for that later. 'What's her name?' he asked as he popped a fresh toothpick into his mouth.

"She doesn't have a name," Eugenia said sharply. "When she's sold to some sheik or Chinaman, he'll give her one," she said spitefully.

Taking the child by the hand, Archie thought to himself, she's cracked all right. "Wait here until I'm gone," he instructed. Once he was out of Eugenia's hearing, he said softly, "You're a pretty little thing." Rosalind frowned as she studied him intently for a moment before she smiled. He laughed. "Never mind her. Archie's got a nice home for you with real nice people."

The funeral was a far worse affair than Amanda had expected. It was bitter cold, and as the vicar wound up the

sermon, it started to sleet. The servants, who had all adored Michael, wept copiously. Two of the younger ones fainted. Blinking back tears, Amanda let her gaze wander over the endless rows of elaborate gray headstones and memorials decorated with stern angels, smiling cherubs, gaudy crosses, saints, and flowers, all emblazoned with impressive gold and silver lettering. A biting wind caused her to draw the collar of her coat closer about her. Wreaths of colorful flowers decorated with silk ribbons lay nearby. Soggy dead leaves and decapitated flowers ruthlessly torn from their place by the rising wind and sleet tumbled over the hard ground, creating a swishing sound. A rose petal struck her on the cheek and she shivered. For a brief instant, it had felt like a farewell kiss from Michael. How absurd, she thought hysterically, her throat aching with unshed tears. It's so unreal. If only Michael were alive again for just a few moments. There were words she wished she could take back and worst of all, words left unsaid. Amanda's fingers and toes were numb with the cold. The hem of her dress was soaking wet and clung to the calves of her legs with damp ferocity. Her head ached. She looked forward to returning home, where she could remove her wet clothing and sink into merciful slumber.

A premonition of the disaster that awaited her was first felt on her return to Hackett Lane. As she turned into number 48, the door was flung open by Brice, who had left the funeral early. His face was ashen. "Thank goodness you're back, madam."

"What is it?" Amanda asked in concern as she stepped inside. "Has Mrs. Powell been taken ill?"

"There's a policeman in the parlor and . . . and something dreadful has happened," Brice said as he removed her coat with trembling hands.

"Have we been robbed?" she asked surprised.

"I had better explain," a strange voice replied.

Amanda turned and found herself facing a tall, thin man in his mid-forties with expressive gray eyes. His expression was mournful.

"Are you the policeman?" Amanda asked uneasily.

"Inspector Roberts of Scotland Yard," he said in a pleasant voice devoid of accent. "You must be the young Mrs. Powell."

"That's right. What is the trouble?"

"If you would just step in here a moment," the inspector said softly, leading her into the parlor, where a fire was burning.

Amanda requested Brice to bring in some tea. Once the door was closed, she asked, "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I understand you've just been to your husband's funeral," Inspector Roberts said sympathetically.

"Yes, but . . ."

"I'm very sorry to hear it, very sorry indeed."

"Please, Inspector," Amanda said, beginning to feel annoyed as well as alarmed, "if you have something to tell me, I urge you to do so at once."

"I can see that you're a woman of strength and character who isn't likely to fall into a fit of the vapors," he said with evident relief. "What I have to tell you is going to come as a great shock, particularly so as it falls on top of your husband's death." He paused for breath, and when he continued his voice was grave but kind. "It grieves me to have to inform you that your daughter has been kidnapped."

Amanda stared. "Kidnapped!" she repeated, horrified, as a wave of nausea passed over her.

"Perhaps it would be best if you sat down," he said.

"But who? Why?" she asked frantically.

"We don't know who yet, but presumably she was taken for ransom money."

"That's ridiculous. We're not wealthy. My mother-in-law is the one who . . ." she stopped, frowning. "Where is she? She was with Rosalind."

"When I arrived, Mrs. Powell was in a state of nervous collapse. At the doctor's urging, she took a sleeping potion and it has taken effect. She's sleeping upstairs."

"What did she say? How did it happen?"

"Apparently she had unlocked the front door, intending to take your daughter for a walk. At the last moment, she forgot her gloves and went upstairs to retrieve them, placing the child in the drawing room. She mislaid them and was absent for approximately ten minutes. When she returned, the front door was wide open and the drawing room door was ajar. A pair of silver candlestick holders were gone, along with one or two other valuable objects, and Rosalind was missing."

"My God!"

"Mrs. Powell frantically searched the house for over an hour before sending for the police. By that time she was rather upset, as you may imagine."

"I don't understand. She didn't hear anything or see anyone?"

"Evidently not," Inspector Roberts said in an expressionless voice. "I'm hoping she will be able to tell us more tomorrow."

"Rosalind," Amanda whispered hoarsely. "It can't be true. It's too cruel." She began to sob.

Brice entered, bearing the tea things. Also on the tray was a decanter of brandy. "I thought it might prove useful," he confided in a hushed tone to the inspector.

"That was very thoughtful," Inspector Roberts murmured. "She could use something bracing about now."

"If there is anything else," Brice added unhappily, "I shall be nearby."

The inspector added a generous slug of brandy to Amanda's tea before bringing it over to her. At Brice's entrance, she had done her best to regain her composure.

"Tell me, what are the chances that . . . that Rosalind . . ." she shuddered, unable to continue. The teacup rattled in her hand and she put it down.

"It is my belief she hasn't been harmed, and I'm sure you'll have her back with you before too long," he said in a confident voice.

"When can we expect to receive a ransom note?"

"That's difficult to say."

"It's so awful," Amanda said in a choked voice. "I was going to take Rosalind with me, but my mother-in-law begged me to let her stay with her. She was feeling so poorly over her son . . . my husband's death, that she wasn't able to accompany me to the funeral."

"You couldn't possibly have known your daughter was going to be kidnapped," he said gently.

"No, I suppose not," she muttered, blowing her nose on the napkin he had handed her.

"I understand Rosalind is your mother-in-law's only grandchild. She must be very fond of her."

Amanda flushed and hesitated before she answered him. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Would you like me to send for a woman friend to stay with you?" he asked as he put down his empty cup.

"I don't want anyone, not tonight. I just want to be left alone," she said irritably. Realizing how rude this must sound, she rubbed her eyes and added with a sigh, "I'm sorry, Inspector. I didn't mean . . ."

"Don't apologize. There's no need," he assured her. "The doctor left enough medicine for you to take some if you feel like it. It's on the night table in your room. I strongly advise you to at least finish the tea. There's no need to get up," he added quickly. "I'll let myself out."

"Thank you," Amanda said in an unsteady voice. As soon as the door closed, her will crumbled and she abandoned herself to the terror and grief that had been threatening to overwhelm her since her arrival home. Eventually, the dry, hacking sobs gave way to a dull, heavy numbness that froze her limbs into immobility. She continued to sit in the chair staring in front of her with vacant eyes. The door slowly opened and someone stepped into the dark room. Amanda thought it must be the butler.

"What is it, Brice?" she asked in a wooden voice without turning around.

Instead of answering, the shadowy figure came closer. Catching a whiff of the cloyingly sweet smell of gardenias, Amanda recognized the scent as Eugenia's. With an effort, she forced herself to focus her bleary, red eyes on her mother-in-law, who was standing in front of her. The only light in the room was provided by the dying embers of the fire. She shivered as the fear that had been in the back of her mind all along broke free at last. The look of hate and venom that leaped out at her from the bulging blue eyes stripped the last vestiges of doubt from her mind. Gripping the sides of the chair, she forced herself to speak calmly.

"Inspector Roberts told me you were asleep."

"I only took half the dose of laudanum the doctor prescribed. I wanted to have a little talk with you about the future."

Amanda stared at her, feeling a rush of horror.

"Michael made me promise that if anything happened to him I would let you stay on. I knew you would be worried, so I decided to put your mind at rest. You can stay for as long as you like," she said, her eyes hard as agate.

"What happened to Rosalind?" Amanda demanded. "You know, don't you?"

"How does it feel," Eugenia whispered harshly, "to be bereft of a child?"

Amanda stood up. "What did you do to her?"

"I warned my darling not to marry you," Eugenia snarled. "I told him you weren't good enough for him, but he wouldn't listen. He was so beautiful, so handsome, my son."

"What have you done with Rosalind?" Amanda felt her self-control slipping. Any moment now she was going to start strangling her mother-in-law.

"When *she* was born, I knew. I sensed she wasn't a child of Michael's." Noting Amanda's surprise, she added, "Yes, I knew the truth. Then I overheard Michael tell you he could never have children. He wouldn't turn you and her out. He was too generous for that. He was too good for a whore like you, but the knowledge of your infidelity killed him. He wanted to die because of the shame you brought him."

"Michael isn't dead because of me," Amanda said desperately. "He loved taking risks and enjoyed the glory of being a hero."

"Liar! Slut!"

"Where is Rosalind?" Amanda screamed, jumping up and shaking her mother-in-law. "You're going to tell me."

Breaking free, Eugenia smiled. "I got rid of her, and the best part is that you'll never know if she's alive or dead. That's your punishment for flaunting your adulterous sins before the world and trying to palm your devil's spawn off on my son."

"You're mad. Michael wouldn't have wanted you to hurt Rosalind," she said wildly.

"He was a saint," Eugenia agreed. "He couldn't take up the sword of vengeance in his own name, so I have done it for him. I planned it even before he died," she confessed proudly.

"You won't get away with it. Inspector Roberts will force you to tell the truth." Amanda exclaimed. "Rosalind is an innocent child who has never done you any harm."

"She was conceived in lust through a vile union. With her first breath she inhaled the taint of evil. Besides," Eugenia laughed softly, "no one can prove a thing. I've seen to that. It's your word against mine. I rather enjoyed playing the grieving grandmother. The loss of your husband and child within a few days has unbalanced your mind. You're imagin-

ing things. That's what people will say, Amanda."

"Tell me where she is," Amanda shrieked grabbing her by the hair.

"Get away from me, you filthy slut." Eugenia snatched up the poker. The two women struggled. Suddenly, Eugenia's face turned purple and she started gasping for breath. Dropping the poker, she staggered back, crashing into the display of smiling china cats, which shattered. Before Amanda could summon any of the servants, Eugenia made a hideous grimace and crumpled unconscious onto the rug at her feet.

Chapter Twelve

SALLY FORTESQUE SAT up in bed and stretched. "Good Lord, it's only seven A.M.," she yawned. "If Mandy is here at this hour she must be in a bad way."

"I'm afraid so, madam," her maid, Rose, confided. "Mr. Wilkins said she looked white as a sheet."

"Poor thing! I knew I shouldn't have let her go home alone to that mother-in-law of hers. I should have insisted she stay here. Where did Wilkins put her?" she asked as she jumped out of bed and began getting dressed.

"In the breakfast parlor. Mr. Wilkins thought she could do with some bacon and eggs and good strong tea."

"Tell Cook to lay out a large spread. I'm famished." Since it was a well-known fact that Sally's appetite at any hour of the day or night would have put a starving man to shame, Rose smiled to herself as she left to carry out her mistress's orders.

"Mandy dearest," Sally said gaily a few minutes later as she swept into the breakfast parlor, wearing a deep blue chiffon dress, "you look absolutely ghastly. I've been meaning to tell you that living in the same house with Eugenia Powell has had a most corrosive effect upon your complexion. I insist you stay with me, at least until you make up your mind what you want to do with your life."

"I'm afraid I have no choice now, that is if you'll have me," Amanda said tremulously.

"Of course I shall have you," Sally said, hugging her, "for as long as you can stand it."

"It's so dreadful. I don't know how much longer I can bear

it." Amanda began to weep quietly on Sally's shoulder. Wilkins appeared with a tray in hand, but sizing up the situation in a glance, set it down on the table and discreetly departed.

"There, there. It's all right," Sally said soothingly. "For what it's worth, Michael loved flying and he was a hero. The old cliché 'time heals all wounds' is true, you know."

"It's not just Michael. It's Rosalind, and now," Amanda said her voice hysterical, "Eugenia."

Sally frowned. "Rosalind and Eugenia! Whatever do you mean?"

"When I came home yesterday from the funeral," Amanda explained shakily as Sally poured out two cups of steaming tea, "an inspector from Scotland Yard was there. He told me Rosalind had been kidnapped."

"Kidnapped! Mandy how dreadful. How did it happen?"

"Eugenia told him a story about someone entering the house while she was upstairs and the door unlocked. They stole some things from the drawing room and took Rosalind."

"How very peculiar."

"Yes, that's what I thought too," Amanda agreed, taking a sip of tea. "But I was so upset at the time and Eugenia was upstairs sleeping from some medicine the doctor had given her that I didn't question it. It was only later that I began to wonder and then Eugenia came down. She . . . she was mad, Sally, absolutely insane. I can't believe I lived in the same house with someone who was that unbalanced without realizing it."

"What did she say?"

"She admitted the story was a lie and said some awful things. She told me she had gotten rid of Rosalind."

"You mean she . . . she murdered her?" Sally asked, horrified.

"That's just it, I don't know. She wouldn't say what she had done with her. I lost my temper and attacked her. We struggled and then . . . and then she had an attack and fainted. I sent for the doctor right away."

"What was wrong with her?"

"It's her heart. She could go at any time. The doctor doesn't expect her to last out the week. Oh, Sally, what am I to do if she dies? I'll never know what became of Rosalind." Her voice broke.

"No wonder you're in such a state," Sally said, urging some toast on her. "It's so horrible. What does the inspector think? Have you told him what Eugenia said?"

Amanda nodded. "Yes. He told me he suspected Eugenia was lying all along. He promised to do his best to find Rosalind, only I'm afraid if Eugenia doesn't tell us what she did with her it will be impossible. She might even be dead."

"Did he say that?"

"No, he's been very kind, only . . ."

"It's no time to be discouraged and get bogged down in gloomy suppositions," Sally said firmly. "Eugenia isn't dead yet, and even if she's mean enough to go to her grave with the secret, we shall find Rosalind. Cecil and I will do whatever we can to help, but you have to cooperate by trying to get some rest and then coming down here and eating a decent meal. Wasting away to skeletal proportions isn't going to help anyone, certainly not Rosalind."

"I keep thinking about her, where she is and if she's frightened or hungry or . . ."

"Darling, you can't think about it," Sally said gently. "I'll send Rose over to get some of your things, and I'll tell Wilkins to put you in the yellow room. It's bright and cheery. Best of all, it's next to mine, so if you feel you want to talk in the middle of the night, you need only tap on my door. I'm a light sleeper." This was, as all the servants knew, a manifestly untrue statement. "The only rule I shall insist on is that you have your meals with me. Bringing extra trays of food to people's rooms creates undue work for the servants and you know how touchy they can be. You do understand, don't you?" she asked anxiously.

"I understand that you're an exceedingly kind, loyal friend whom I am very fortunate to have."

"You only say that now," Sally said, embarrassed. "Wait until you've lived under my roof for a while. You'll think me a positive shrew."

At supper that evening, Amanda only nibbled at her food. Sally didn't have the heart to reproach her. When the coffee and desert arrived, Wilkins informed them that Inspector Roberts was waiting to see Amanda.

"Show him in here," Sally instructed.

As soon as Wilkins had set another place for the inspector, he departed, Sally pounced on Roberts.

"Have you learned anything new?" she asked eagerly as she handed him a dish with a large helping of trifle and cream.

"We've put out the word, and sooner or later something will turn up."

"That's very discouraging," Sally said, frowning. "Is that old witch still refusing to speak?"

Inspector Roberts drank some coffee and scowled, not at the taste, which was excellent, but at the disappointing news he had to relate. "Mrs. Powell passed away about an hour ago."

"Did she . . ." Amanda began and then paled as she saw his face.

"I'm afraid not. She remained obstinate to the end, insisting you were hysterical and imagining things. We did discover, however, that she withdrew a considerable amount of money from her bank account over a week ago. Unless it's hidden in the house, she gave it to someone."

"You mean the person who has Rosalind?" Amanda asked.

Clearing his throat, the inspector said, "That is my opinion."

"What a nasty, beastly woman she was," Sally said passionately. "I never dreamed she could be so wicked and vindictive."

"I must admit, Mrs. Powell," Inspector Roberts said curiously, "I thought it odd for her to go to such lengths in order to hurt you. I've heard of women who don't get on with their son's wives, but they don't take it out on the children."

Both pair of eyes were on Amanda, who flushed and said uneasily, "She was a dreadful woman whose one passion was her son. If Rosalind were back with me, I could almost feel sorry for her."

"Well I could never do so," Sally said indignantly.

"I suppose I should see to her funeral," Amanda said, depressed. "Michael isn't alive and she hasn't anyone else, but I don't have the stomach for it."

"The estate will take care of it," the inspector assured her as he finished his trifle. "Do you intend to stay with Mrs. Fortesque for the next week or so?"

"Yes."

"Good, then I shall know where to reach you in case we unearth anything important. And don't worry, we'll find your daughter."

It was inevitable that Amanda did worry, especially as the days turned into weeks and little or no worthwhile information appeared to be forthcoming. Even when peace was officially declared on November 11, it did little to lift anyone's spirits.

The only promising lead involved a woman who fit the description of Mrs. Powell. She had been seen talking to a shady lawyer in Marylebone Road. Under pressure, he admitted his client had wanted to interview members of the underworld for a book she was writing, or so she told him. He had sent her several likely prospects, but on closer scrutiny, the hopeful lead turned into a dead end. The men were unanimous in sensing Eugenia was on the lookout for some sort of illegal activity but denied knowledge of what it entailed. No one would admit to being taken on. In addition, the day Rosalind disappeared, two of the men were in the Old Bailey. One was involved in a street brawl that landed him in the hospital and the other was getting roaringly and publicly drunk with his chums in the local pub. To the inspector's irritation, they suggested it was possible she had picked someone else entirely, since all of them admitted to having discussed the interview with their friends. After the funeral, Inspector Roberts produced a search warrant and unearthed all of the so-called stolen objects hidden throughout the house. Although this unquestionably settled Eugenia's guilt, it did not help to locate Rosalind.

Sally did her best to take Amanda's mind off the discouraging news. She dragged her to the theater, concerts, dinner parties, and on shopping sprees. Ruthlessly, she overrode her protestations, plunging her into a constant swirl of social engagements. The idea was to exhaust Amanda to such an extent that she would sleep through the night. In order to get through the day without collapsing, she would be compelled to eat properly. To some extent Sally was successful, but when Amanda began to complain in earnest at the hectic schedule, Sally changed her tactics. What Mandy needed, she decided, was peace and quiet. With this in mind, she accepted an invitation from Cecil to join him in Yorkshire. Hoping the fresh air and change of scenery would do Amanda good, she nobly sacrificed her own personal animosity toward the placid countryside.

Brentwood Hall turned out to be as boring as always. Moreover, the change seemed to have had an adverse effect upon

Amanda, who withdrew into herself and spent hours taking solitary walks down lonely country lanes. The circles under her eyes deepened, although she kept insisting she preferred the country to town life.

In order to keep herself amused, Sally was perusing a scandalous weekly paper that had been sent in from the city. "It says here that Lady Marchfield intends to marry her butler," she said, interested. If he looks anything like Wilkins, she's a fool."

"I don't know why you read that paper. It's nothing but trash," Cecil said with a snort.

"Eleanor Morrison is in the sanitorium again," Sally continued, ignoring him. "Her brother had the same problem, only his downfall was gin instead of sherry."

"Lies, all lies," Cecil grunted.

"My, my, it says here that the ambassador to Switzerland, Gordon Jessup, didn't have a stroke after all. He took his own life because the notorious spy Mata Hari wormed state secrets out of him during the war and it was about to come out. I wonder if it's true!"

"Rubbish, that's what it is," Cecil growled. "You females are all alike. You believe anything. I'm going into the library, where a man can read a respectable paper in peace."

Returning to her paper, Sally turned the page. As she glanced down the column of upcoming events, her attention was suddenly arrested by an article about an art auction. The list of rich and aristocratic people who intended to be there was very impressive, but her eye was caught by one particular entry. She glanced covertly at Amanda, who was reading Dickens. Folding the paper, she said with a yawn. "I believe I've had my fill of the country."

Amanda looked up from her book and sighed. "We can go back if you like, only I warn you, my constitution is likely to break down under another onslaught of round-the-clock activities."

"If you like, you can sleep all day," Sally promised.

"Actually," Amanda said, frowning, "I must start looking for work. I can't live off you and Cecil forever."

"Nonsense. I won't hear of it, at least not until the end of the month. Say you'll stay with us, Mandy."

"Temporarily perhaps, but . . ."

"There'll be no buts," Sally said, wrinkling her nose. "I

hate butts. They always imply that the person has no intention of following through or is only doing so against their better judgment." Studying Amanda for a moment, she said softly, "I know this is in poor taste, and I wouldn't hold it against you if you told me to mind my own business for a change, but was Rosalind Michael's child?" The startled look of guilt was answer enough. "Mind you, it crossed my mind once or twice, especially after the way Eugenia carried on. It was abominable behavior, even for her."

"She knew," Amanda admitted shortly.

"I must say, for someone so refined and quiet, you've led a very dramatic life. Out of such heady stuff heroines are made, you know."

"Aren't heroines the ones who end up living happily ever after?" Amanda asked dryly.

"Well," Sally said mischievously, "your life isn't over yet, and you never know what the future holds."

If Amanda had had the slightest inkling of what Sally had planned, she would never have agreed to stay on. It was, therefore, with an air of surreptitiousness that Sally left the house two days later, having donned her new suede hat and coat to meet Reginald Keyes at the Ritz.

"You're looking very merry," Reginald commented with a smile once the waiter had brought their drinks and departed.

They remembered each other from embassy parties they had both attended. For a few minutes they reminisced about the gala social events of pre-war London. "I was very relieved to learn you got out of Antwerp safely," Sally said at last.

"I didn't hear about Emily for several days," Reginald said, after a pause. "I was devastated."

"I heard all about that," she said softly. "But you mustn't blame yourself."

After a moment Reginald asked with deliberate casualness, "How is Amanda?"

"She's in a horrid state," Sally confided. "The most awful things have happened to her. Her husband died only a few weeks before the end of the war, and her mother-in-law, who hated Mandy, took the child and . . . well I'm not exactly sure what she did with her. That's why Mandy's so distraught."

"I didn't know she had a child," Reginald said, surprised.

Sally took a sip of wine and said sweetly, "Her name is

Rosalind. She's a cute little thing and her mother is positively frantic with worry. It's been four months now and the police have made no progress."

"You say her mother-in-law kidnapped the child," Reginald said after a moment's hesitation.

"Yes, but the monster died soon afterward and the secret of Rosalind's disappearance has died with her. I don't have to tell you how badly this has affected Mandy. If you saw her, you would be shocked at how thin and peaked she looks. I've done my absolute best to pull her out of the dumps, but as the days pass without any news, she gets more and more abstracted and withdrawn."

"What will she do?"

"Look for work I suppose," Sally sighed. It's going to be difficult with the war over and everyone looking for jobs. All the decent ones will go to the men anyway. I thought I could wrangle her a position as a social secretary with one of my friends. She's very organized and methodical."

Reginald was staring gloomily into his empty wineglass, deep in thought.

"How did she take Emily Peters's death?" Reginald asked.

"Naturally, Amanda was upset," Sally replied. "She returned to England soon afterwards."

"And she hasn't contacted me since then," he mused. Then, after a moment he asked, "Are you going to tell her you saw me today?"

"I think I should. Mandy needs some cheering up. As a matter of fact, why don't you drop by one evening?" she said as if suddenly inspired. "I would love to see you again, and I think Mandy would be pleased once she got over the shock. My address is fourteen Madeira Lane." Then she added quickly, "I have to be running along. I have an appointment with my dressmaker at three and it's twenty-five past now. It has been delightful seeing you again, Reginald."

Reginald smiled as he took her hand.

As Sally hailed a cab she decided that there was a good chance of Reginald making an appearance at her house.

Sally's instinct proved infallible, as Reginald made an appearance that Friday evening. When Wilkins announced him, Amanda glanced at Sally in horror. "He mustn't see me," she said and made a move to escape.

"You have to face him sooner or later," Sally said gently.

"He knows you're staying with me. I ran into him the other day. Why not get it over with?"

"Did you know he was coming? Why didn't you warn me?" Amanda said wildly. Hearing footsteps in the hall and realizing it was too late to flee, she sat down abruptly with the air of a prisoner about to be sentenced.

"I hope my unexpected visit isn't inconvenient," Reginald said as he entered. "If so, I can come back another time."

"Don't be silly," Sally said, pleased by the fact that Amanda's color kept flooding her face, and Reginald couldn't keep his eyes off her. "We were being terribly dull until you arrived. Would you like to join us with some coffee, or would you prefer a drink?"

"A whiskey and soda, please."

Wilkins left to fulfill this request, and Amanda finally came out of her terror long enough to throw herself into Reginald's arms. "Oh, Reginald, it's wonderful to see you again."

The strain had altered her appearance and she was thinner, with shadows under her magnificent eyes, but otherwise it was as if time had stopped.

Reginald held her close to him. "It's been too long, Amanda. Too long."

"I'm going to my room for a shawl," Sally declared from the doorway. "I'll only be a few minutes."

Neither Amanda nor Reginald, embracing in the middle of the room, heard a word she had said. Only after they had kissed and hugged, and kissed again, did they realize they had the room to themselves.

"I was very hurt that you never looked me up after all we went through," he said, at last bringing up the subject that was on both their minds.

"I . . . I thought because we were both married it was for the best," she stammered.

"I believed for a long time," Reginald said, studying her face intently, "that you felt our relationship to be a very casual affair, one where the feelings were not deeply engaged. Was I right?"

"You mustn't think that," Amanda said earnestly. "I was terribly drawn to you, and I've never felt so deeply for a man before, not even my husband when I first met him. It frightened me." She looked down at her hands, blushing. "You must believe me," she said in a small voice. "It was just

that it seemed like such an impossible situation."

Taking her hand, he said, "Sally told me about your daughter's kidnapping. I'm very sorry. If there's anything I can do, you need only ask."

Amanda glanced at him warily. Had Sally told him Rosalind was his daughter? She could read only compassion and kindness in his face. "Thank you. Inspector Roberts is doing the best he can." She could have left it at that, but having just made a clean sweep of her emotions, she found it impossible to keep the secret from him. "Rosalind is your daughter," she said nervously.

He gazed at her for a moment, compassion and love in his eyes. Then he drew her close to him once again. "I suspected," he said softly, "although I could never be sure. Thank you for telling me."

When Sally returned, she was not disappointed to see the two sitting close together on the couch, Amanda's hand in Reginald's. Wilkins materialized with the refreshments shortly thereafter and everyone chatted on amiably.

Reginald's visit was brief, but he promised to return the following day and continued to do so for the next three weeks. There was a noticeable improvement in Amanda, who looked forward to his visits with eagerness. One afternoon while Sally was out and just as Reginald was preparing to leave, Inspector Roberts arrived.

"I have something to tell you that may relieve your mind a little, but I'm afraid it isn't the good news you've been hoping for," he said bluntly.

"At this point, Inspector," Reginald said. "Any news at all is an improvement."

"The police received an anonymous note yesterday saying that Rosalind was safe and sound and in good hands."

"What else did it say?" Amanda asked eagerly.

"Nothing else," the inspector said, handing her a scrap of dirty paper.

Reginald frowned. "Surely you can trace the note."

"There's nothing much to go on," Inspector Roberts declared. "The paper is very poor quality and sold in stationary stores all across the country. The postmark is Victoria Station, not a very promising lead, and I'm sorry to say there are no fingerprints. The criminal element seems to have gotten the

wind up about our latest mode of detection. They're very careful."

"Is the note genuine, do you think?" Amanda asked unsteadily.

"I believe so," the inspector said. "I have a strong hunch Rosalind has been taken in by a childless couple, or at least someone who won't treat her badly."

"I don't understand," Amanda said angrily. "Why don't they return her to me? Don't they know how upset I am? I wouldn't press charges. I just want her back."

"Well," the inspector began awkwardly, "there could be many reasons for that. They could be a perfectly respectable couple, mind you, but desperate to have children of their own. Somehow Rosalind came into their lives and they don't want to give her up, or they might not trust you enough not to prosecute once you got her back. The note could even have been sent by someone else, a middleman, say."

"A middleman?" Amanda queried.

"Yes, someone who made direct contact with the late Mrs. Powell. We don't know what she told them about Rosalind. This individual may have realized too late that the child has a mother who is distraught, and maybe he's the type who suffers from a twinge of conscience. He has got a streak of kindness, a soft spot, say, and . . ."

"Kindness!" Amanda burst out. "How can you suggest such a thing? If he was truly kind, he would return my little girl to me." Tears choking her, Amanda ran out of the room.

Reginald was about to follow when the inspector detained him. "If I could just have a word with you, sir?"

"Yes, of course," Reginald said, surprised.

"Mrs. Powell has been through a great deal these past few months, and she's held up wonderfully well." He coughed. "I'm going to be honest with you, sir. I don't hold out much hope that the child will ever be found."

"But surely . . ." Reginald protested.

"We'll continue with our investigation, but it's my experience that if a kidnap victim isn't found within the first month or so, chances are he never does turn up. The longer the case drags on, the colder the trail gets."

"Do you really think Rosalind is alive?" Reginald asked.

"Yes sir, I do. The note sort of clinches it. If she were dead, her body would have turned up before this. I have it figured

that someone took her and brought her straight to this couple I mentioned who want a child. There are plenty of them about who don't want to or can't go through regular channels. Afterward, they could have taken fright and moved to Cornwall, Devon, East Anglica, Wales, or any place on God's earth."

"You're absolutely sure there's no chance of finding the child?"

"The reward money you offered might be an inducement to some sharp lad who thinks he knows something, but after five months . . ." His voice trailed off significantly.

"I see!"

"I'm telling you this because I didn't have the heart to tell her myself.

"Thank you, Inspector."

"I'm happy to help, sir."

On the next occasion when he was alone with Amanda, Reginald proposed.

"What about your wife?" Amanda asked uncertainly.

"Helen and I have been living apart for years. I intended to divorce her."

"I . . . I don't know what to say."

"I was hoping you would say yes," Reginald said, stroking her cheek.

"But what about Rosalind? I can't leave England without her."

Gently enfolding her to him, Reginald said, "Inspector Roberts is doing what he can. He'll let us know as soon as anything turns up. There's nothing you can do by remaining here."

"You don't understand," Amanda said, pulling away. "I can't leave. It isn't right that I should be . . ."

"Happy?" Reginald suggested gently. "You're not at fault for trusting your mother-in-law. You couldn't have guessed how twisted and full of hate she was."

"I should have known," she insisted tearfully. "There were signs. I should have known."

"Darling," Reginald whispered, holding her close, "stop blaming yourself. Haven't we been through enough? Don't we owe it to ourselves to try to secure a modicum of happiness while we still can? I love you, Mandy. Do you love me?"

"Yes, but . . ."

Instead of arguing with her, Reginald turned her face up to his and kissed her. Slow and gentle at first, the kiss deepened, melting away the years that had separated them. "If it will make you feel better," he said afterward as her head rested on his shoulder, "we'll stay in London."

"You have a life in America," Amanda said, pulling away. "You would resent staying here, and you would blame me."

"My life is with you," Reginald insisted. "If I were to return to America without you, I would be far more unhappy than if I remained in London."

"I have no right to ask you to stay," Amanda said, flushing.

"I am a wealthy man. We will be citizens of the world." Reginald exclaimed fervently.

"I need some time," she said, walking over to the window and looking out. "I'm not ready to get married again, and besides," she added with a smile as she turned to face him "you aren't even divorced yet."

"True enough. I'll start divorce proceedings immediately. That will take some time to settle, and you can decide what you want to do. But I warn you, if you're still hedging by the time the divorce is settled, I'll drag you off and live with you in sin."

Reginald smiled and Amanda laughed and didn't resist when he took her in his arms again.

Under the impression he was going to obtain a quiet divorce, Reginald was shocked when Helen, hearing of his activities in London, decided to attack first and filed a petition for divorce before he did. Wearing a look of long-suffering martyrdom, she inundated the major newspapers with scathing reports of *that woman*, reputed to be, among other things, a dance hall queen, a sly opportunist, and a scarlet woman. In between tears and sighs, she told eager journalists horrifying tales of brutality and neglect by her degenerate, philandering husband. By the time she was through, the publicity had reached epidemic proportions and both Reginald and Amanda were hounded by the press, who had discovered their whereabouts. The curtains at number 14 Madeira Lane had to be drawn at all hours to keep the photographers from sneaking up and taking their pictures as they went about their daily tasks.

Amanda's reputation was in shreds. Reginald was furious, and Helen had the sympathy of half the nation and the hand of Ambrose C. Ponsford III, a cousin of the Vanderbilts.

Shortly after the divorce went through, Inspector Roberts arrived with a peculiar little man in tow. He had carrot red hair and yellowish eyes that nervously darted around the drawing room. A toothpick protruded raffishly from between his blistered lips.

"This is Archie Gluck," Inspector Roberts said dryly in explanation. "He may be able to help us."

"Do you mean you know where Rosalind is?" Amanda asked, catching her breath.

Archie shifted his weight uncomfortably and cleared his throat. His voice was high and had a whining tone to it. "I might know something see. It all depends."

Amanda looked puzzled, but Reginald said harshly, "How much?"

Archie straightened his shoulders and raised his eyes to the level of Reginald's. "It ain't the money. I have me principles."

"You were caught red-handed breaking and entering in Kensington Park," Inspector Roberts reminded him sharply. "We're talking about a prison term, Archie. You said you had information to trade with regard to Mrs. Powell's little girl. If you have something to say, say it."

Archie's eyes shifted to Amanda, as if looking for sympathy. "It ain't as simple as that."

"I'm terribly sorry," Inspector Roberts apologized angrily. "It was a mistake to come here."

"No, please, Inspector," Amanda pleaded tearfully. "If this man has some information, no matter how trivial, I want to hear it."

"She's your daughter, is she?" Archie inquired curiously.

"Yes, she is, and I love her very much. If you know something, I beg you to tell me what it is."

Archie was not unmoved by this speech. When he spoke, the whining tone was gone. Taking out a fresh toothpick, he popped it into his mouth. "What about the old toad? Who was she to you?"

"He's referring to your mother-in-law," the inspector in-

formed Amanda with the same tone he would use if he were handing her a biscuit.

"She's dead," Amanda said, shuddering.

Archie seemed relieved. "She was a nasty bit of goods," he commented.

"No truer statement was ever made," Reginald muttered grimly.

"She came to me with her filthy scheme," Archie said, chewing on his toothpick and scowling. "She talked to some of the other blokes too, but she didn't tell them all about it, like she did me."

"What exactly was her scheme?" Reginald inquired.

"She planned to wait for a certain day and then bring this kid to me. She wanted me to sell her overseas to some Chinaman or Arab."

"My God!" Amanda exclaimed, turning white.

Reginald put an arm around her. "Go on."

"I thought she was barmy at first, but she was dead serious. She was going to pay me to get rid of the kid. A little tyke like that. Imagine!" He sounded indignant. "Naturally, when I heard it was kidnapping she was up to, I turned her down flat. Kidnapping ain't in my line. You know that, governor," he added addressing the inspector, the whine back in his voice.

"Why didn't you immediately report it to the police?" Amanda demanded.

Archie looked embarrassed. "I ain't exactly on the best of terms with 'em. Besides, I seen as how she had already gotten another bloke to do her dirty work and I don't rat on me mates. It ain't right. But I don't mind admitting it's been on me conscience, and I've had a run of bad luck because of it."

Neither Amanda or Reginald saw fit to debate the question of his morals.

"Then you know who she hired?" Reginald asked.

"I seen him all right. It was Charlie Meadows."

"The same Charlie Meadows who died last week?" the inspector asked suspiciously.

"Aye, that's the one. He had a bad ticker, Charlie did. Even as a lad. He could have gone at any time. "Poor bloke," he added with a sigh.

"What did he do with Rosalind?" Amanda asked desperately. "Please say you know," she begged.

"As it happens, I kept tabs on the situation. Your little girl was a pretty little tyke, and I got a soft spot for kids. It's one of my weaknesses."

"Just stick to the facts," the inspector instructed impatiently.

"Charlie had a soft spot for kids too. He gave her to a nice, respectable family who can't have any of their own."

"What family?" Amanda asked eagerly.

Archie hedged. "She's well taken care of. She ain't being mistreated or nothing like that."

"If you know the identity of this family, it is your duty to tell us," the inspector snapped, losing patience. "The court will take what you've said in consideration when your trial for robbery comes up," he added.

"I know that, governor, but I have me principles. I wouldn't want those people to get into any trouble. They're nice folks. All they wanted was a kid, and they didn't have the money to adopt one. They're older, too. What they done wasn't really wrong," he added.

"I can't make any promises," the inspector said severely. "You know that."

"Then I can't bring myself to make any promises either," Archie muttered unhappily, loudly sucking on his toothpick.

"I could make life very difficult for you," the inspector threatened.

"You could at that," Archie sighed.

"Mr. Gluck," Amanda said shakily, "I must know. I'm going out of my mind with worry. I'm Rosalind's mother and I don't care about anything except getting her back. I won't press charges against the family who has her. I'm grateful they've looked after her and cared for her. If anyone is to blame it's my mother-in-law, and she's dead. Help me, I implore you."

"If I have your word that you won't press charges . . ." Archie began hopefully.

"That's enough, Archie," the inspector ordered sternly. "I'd like to speak to Mrs. Powell alone." Opening the door, he waited until Archie had joined the sergeant, waiting in the hall, and the door was closed again before he spoke.

"I want you to understand something, Mrs. Powell. It is highly probable that Archie is the man who took your daughter. The tale he told about Charlie Meadows was a lie. Charlie

was sick a long time before he died and he didn't leave any money behind. Archie, on the other hand, has been betting pretty heavily at the track."

"I don't care. The important thing is that I get Rosalind back alive and well."

"Another thing," the inspector said. "The only reason Archie wants to protect the family who took Rosalind in is because if they were prosecuted, they would most certainly implicate him."

"He's got to tell us where Rosalind is," Amanda said irritably. "He's got to."

"Do you believe what he says about the child being safe?" Reginald asked.

Inspector Roberts considered. "I should think so, yes. It was his idea to come here. He refused to talk except in your presence."

"Good God!" Amanda exclaimed, sinking into a chair.

"There's a chance the people who have Rosalind will have moved since he's last seen them." Inspector Roberts added, "but once we know who they are it will be easier tracking them down, especially if they haven't left the country. Given their financial situation, I doubt if they would be able to do that."

"He shouldn't get away with it," Reginald said bitterly. "If he kidnapped Rosalind, he should be punished."

"I agree with you, sir," the inspector said, rubbing his nose. "But the trouble is, I know Archie. He won't talk unless he gets what he wants. Threats won't make him change his mind. And kidnapping isn't in his line generally. He's not really a vicious criminal. The robbery charges aren't anywhere as serious as kidnapping. I believe him when he said it was on his conscience."

"I don't want Mr. Gluck to be punished. I just want Rosalind back," Amanda insisted.

"Then you'll drop any charges so long as you get your daughter back safe and sound. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"If she's been harmed in any way, the arrangement is off," Reginald warned.

"Inspector, how long do you think it will take before we hear any news?" Amanda asked as he turned to go.

"It could be a day or two if the people are at the same address. If not, a couple of weeks or so," he said cautiously.

"Send me word as soon as you know anything at all," Amanda urged.

"I will."

The following evening he put in an appearance, this time alone. One look at him and Amanda's spirits fell.

"They've moved, haven't they?"

"I'm afraid so, but I shouldn't feel too discouraged. At least now we know their name. It's Tomkins. Their neighbors seemed to think they were going to visit relatives in East Anglia. We'll run them to earth. If we're lucky, it will be before the end of the week."

Torn between despair and joy, Amanda lived in a constant state of nervousness. She lost her appetite and had difficulty sleeping.

By Saturday, all their nerves were frayed. Even the servants were jumpy. That afternoon, while Sally was out and Reginald had come to keep Amanda company, the butler announced Inspector Roberts. This time he was smiling and not alone. At his side, clutching his hand, was Rosalind.

"Mother!" she cried.

Amanda jumped from her seat and rushed over, tears streaming down her cheeks as she took Rosalind in her arms, murmuring endearments.

"I don't know how we can ever thank you, Inspector," Reginald said, his voice betraying his obvious relief. "I don't mind saying, now that it's over, that I was very worried in the beginning. I'm tremendously thankful that it worked out so well."

"So am I," the inspector agreed warmly as he took his leave.

"Thank you again, Inspector," Reginald said, heartily shaking his hand before turning back to Amanda and Rosalind, an expression of tenderness and wonder on his face.

"Darling, isn't it wonderful?" Amanda said, her eyes bright with tears and her voice choking with emotion.

"She is a beautiful little thing," Reginald replied softly. "Just like her mother."

"Reg, I'm so happy."

"Happy enough to marry me?"

She smiled shyly. "It's about time, isn't it?"

Putting his arm around Amanda, Reg drew her and the child to him and kissed them both. When he brushed

Amanda's lips, he sent sparks along her veins. "Shall I see America, then?" she murmured. "I'd like to visit California and Boston and New York too."

"You'll see them all," he promised.

"I think Rosalind would like to live in America," Amanda said, looking into his eyes. "And I would too."

"Darling," Reginald whispered huskily, and before she could say another word, he firmly kissed her, causing Rosalind to laugh delightedly as she was squeezed between them.

*It was the end of an era—but for
Reginald and Amanda it was only
the beginning...*

1914.

*An anarchist's bomb in the Balkans was about to ignite
the wildfire of a war more terrible than the world had
ever known, that would bury forever the glittering
grandeur of a doomed age.*

*And at the heart of this world gone mad, a man and a
woman met and loved.*

AMANDA—

*imprisoned within the shell of an empty marriage,
she had given up even her dreams—until she found*

REGINALD—

*handsome, wealthy, trying to forget his
secret despair in the gentleman's game of espionage.*

*Together they fought a lovers' war for lovers' peace, a
fragile and mighty passion that would endure and survive
even the end of their world...*

*Gallant
Hearts*



ISBN 0-515-05573-5